2 Narratives about Teaching Writing

Most of us have stories to tell about teaching writing or learning to write. Some of our stories describe strong teaching practices that had positive effects; others are horror stories of grammar overkill and five-paragraph essays that were more like fill-in-the-blank assignments than real writing. Often our university teacher education students tell narratives about the killer paper they remember from high school or the time they were allowed to transform their writing project into a dramatic performance. We tend to remember teachers of writing for specific attributes, such as being sticklers for grammar or their affinity for red pen marks that covered our writing. We also hear, on a more uplifting note, about the teachers who encourage students to explore new genres and expand their understanding of audience or who assign journal writing to increase fluency and motivation.

Many of us come to the teaching of writing as successful and motivated former student writers. In high school, Janet wrote religiously in her journal and learned through reflection on her experiences that ungraded journaling could be an important part of her classroom, while Jonathan was a high school journalist, and that experience led to his focus on real audiences and genres in his writing classroom.

One of the challenges for young teachers is to reach out to all students, not just the motivated and excited few who are interested and successful in all writing tasks. This attempt to motivate, this desire to inspire students to be writers, is a continual challenge that affects our daily practice. As teachers of writing, it is up to us to develop our philosophy of the teaching of composition and give our students opportunities to have rich writing experiences. This chapter should help you begin this process.

What Is Good Writing Instruction?

Different teachers have different ideas about what constitutes “good” writing pedagogy. Our overriding belief about the teaching of writing is that it should be contextual. That is, we must learn to adapt strategies for specific classroom situations and various audiences. Professional writing, for example, with its emphasis on writing as a means of meeting
client needs and problem solving, involves teaching strategies that are different from those for writing about literature. Likewise, the teaching of writing in a middle school is very different from that in a high school setting. Similar arguments could be made for various cultural contexts and socioeconomic situations. We believe, however, that some concepts can guide most writing pedagogy in secondary school classrooms. These are not absolutes, but they can help us as we make decisions about our classrooms and think about the narratives in this chapter.

As in Chapter 1, we challenge you to develop a philosophy of teaching—this time of teaching writing. Why is it important to assign writing in your classes? What kinds of writing should be assigned? What exactly is “process writing,” and how can it be incorporated into writing activities? You will begin to explore these questions as you establish a philosophy of writing instruction in the secondary school. To help you begin this exploration, we adapt a list of best practices in writing instruction. In “Best Practice in Writing,” a chapter in their influential text Best Practice: New Standards for Teaching and Learning in America’s Schools (1998), Zemelman, Daniels, and Hyde describe an overview of traits that can be generally considered best practices in writing instruction. The following list of approaches is derived from their overview, with our additions and interpretations. As in Chapter 1, if you wish to read more about any of these approaches, please consult the annotated bibliography at the end of this chapter.

Characteristics of Effective Secondary Writing Pedagogy

1. Adolescents Should Write Often. Communication through language is an inherently human trait; therefore, early forms of writing often occur before formal instruction. Young children “play” at writing as a developmental tool; for example, they produce drawings that have iconographic meanings and often begin writing words using invented spellings. As students reach the middle and high school grades, they often have lost this desire to play with language and write for fun. This tendency toward language play can, however, be unearthed and revitalized by the creative teacher. Many composition theorists and teacher educators advocate frequent writing assignments in secondary schools to report on learning, to facilitate learning processes, and to engage students in creative expression. Janet Emig (1971), for example, differentiates between extensive (school-sponsored) and reflexive (personal, self-sponsored) writing and concludes that high schools are more likely to engage students in extensive writing activities. She urges teachers to
include more reflexive assignments in their curricula. James Britton (1975) identifies three different ways of writing: transactional (informative), expressive (personal—also the central mode of written expression for Britton), and poetic (creative, patterned), and he urges secondary teachers to include all three types in their lessons. Such frequent and varied writing can lead to increased fluency, increased mastery of content area skills and knowledge, and eventually increased communicative effectiveness.

2. Teachers Should Encourage Student Ownership of Writing. The ultimate responsibility for writing lies with the writer. Teachers develop frameworks and concepts for writing projects, but they must allow students the freedom to develop ownership of their writing. What exactly does ownership mean, and how does a teacher encourage it in his students? Ownership, by our definition, means something akin to taking responsibility for a writing task or a writer becoming aware of her process so that she can self-evaluate the effectiveness of a piece of writing and revise accordingly, perhaps with the help of outside readers. Ownership of writing can encompass a variety of pedagogical strategies, including giving students choices among writing topics and supplying them with feedback and evaluative response without resorting to overly specific commentary that simply tells students what to change to improve their grade. Nancie Atwell (1998) discusses ownership by students of both their reading and their writing processes and products. She suggests a writing workshop approach in which students are writing on different, self-selected topics yet share similar knowledge about planning, revision, and editing.

Some postmodern or postprocess composition theorists are skeptical of the idea of ownership because of the inherently rhetorical and social nature of the writing act; how can a writer “own” a piece of writing if its very creation is dependent on the cultural and social contexts in which it was written? There is a great deal of truth in this skepticism, and we recognize that a writer does not create a piece of writing in a social or rhetorical vacuum. We believe, however, that the concept of ownership as we define it is a useful one for English teachers seeking to encourage student engagement with and interest in writing. There are many ways to nurture student ownership, and such ownership often leads to increased student motivation, more positive attitudes about writing and the language arts, and increased likelihood that students will effectively complete assignments.
3. Teachers Can Help Students Find Authentic Reasons to Write.

Writing must be treated as a valuable resource, not only in school but also in the wider social and professional world in which students will live and work as adults. Topics should be as meaningful for students as possible; in- or out-of-class publishing and the inclusion of real audiences in writing assignments are among the strongest motivators for student writing. Contemporary cultural studies approaches to writing instruction often include discussion of service-learning programs that require students to engage in volunteer or out-of-class work with local social service agencies and then write about some aspect of their experience. While this approach may not be feasible at the middle or high school level, teachers can ask students to research and write about topics of interest or concern in their local communities and schools instead of the distant and archaic topics students are often asked to write about. Teachers can also approach the teaching of writing from a rhetorical perspective, taking into consideration issues of audience, purpose, and effect.

Other ways to bring the real world into the writing classroom and create authentic writing experiences for students include inviting professional writers to class as guest speakers or having students share their texts with people outside of the school and ask for their feedback or response. Many teachers already do quite a bit of in-class (or even in-school) publication, such as posting papers on a bulletin board or publishing them in a school newspaper or literary magazine. All of these are ideas that can provide an audience for student writing that is larger and more “real” than the sole audience of the teacher-grader. As a result, students may (1) try harder, (2) place more value on writing, and (3) understand writing as a part of professional and adult life.

4. Effective Writing Assignments Involve the Complete Writing Process. Writing should be valued as an ongoing process; value should be placed on writing as a process of inquiry, in addition to a final tangible product. In the 1970s and ‘80s, process writing was introduced to secondary English teachers by such theorists and educators as Peter Elbow (1973), Donald Murray (1968), and Ken Macrorie (1976). While the ideas of these pedagogues are still alive in current composition studies, they have been expanded by the social constructivist and postprocess theories of others such as James Berlin (1988, 1996), John Trimbur (1989), and Patricia Bizzell (1992) who have added a contextual component to the writing process, a component that takes into consideration the social and material realities of the writer, the time and place of the writing act,
and the ideologies often at play when a writer tackles a communicative task.

The writing process is generally known to encompass five stages that are viewed as recursive and sometimes simultaneous: planning, prewriting, drafting, revision, and editing. These recursive steps and the opportunity for students to engage in them should be included in most writing assignments or instructional units. Planning involves thinking about a piece of writing and deciding on a general direction or topic; prewriting activities include outlining, mapping, drawing, clustering, freewriting, listing, and other tasks that facilitate or reflect thinking; drafting is the writer’s first best attempt at writing down ideas; revision involves making changes in word choice, sentence structure, organization, or content/details included; and editing is proofreading or correcting errors in grammar, usage, and punctuation. Students can engage in a type of revision called “reformulation,” or “deep” revision. Reformulation requires making major changes to the structure of a piece of writing, not simply changes to surface features. Examples include selecting a different point of view, tone, thematic focus, or audience.

5. Teachers Can Help Students Get Started. An important role of teachers in the writing process occurs early on, in the planning and prewriting stages. Teachers should encourage and guide students as they generate ideas. Also, skillful teachers help student writers gather and organize materials that facilitate the planning of their writing project. How can teachers go about providing this support for student writers? In the rest of this chapter, some specific ideas are presented through the narratives, but in general, teachers can provide classroom time and opportunity for students to think through ideas and/or generate writing topics. One-on-one conferencing, peer group conferencing, and teacher-led whole-group practice in prewriting are all possible ways of supporting the early stages of students’ writing processes.

6. Teachers Can Help Students Draft and Revise. In a similar spirit to the previous point, teachers can also provide valuable assistance (through one-on-one interaction and through effective pedagogical strategies) during the drafting and revision processes. We know that good writing comes through repeated drafting, revision, and re-envisioning of ideas. A teacher’s goal is to guide students through a writing process and then, with practice and feedback, help them to internalize their own process so that they can continue to apply it in later writing tasks throughout their academic and professional lives. This help can occur through conferencing, establishment of peer workshopping groups,
commentary on student texts, and whole-class practice of various writing strategies.

7. Grammar and Mechanics Are Learned in the Context of Actual Writing. Grammar, usage, and punctuation should not be taught in ways that are decontextualized or separated from actual writing projects, such as through handbook drills. Many educational researchers and theorists have reached this conclusion, as early as 1906 and continuing to the present day. While a few research studies defend the study of formal grammar more or less in isolation (Neuleib, 1977; Kolln, 1981; Holt, 1982), they are outnumbered by the multitude of studies that advocate a contextualized approach to grammar instruction that teaches grammar, usage, and other stylistic issues while students are engaged in the writing process and at a point when these concepts and skills are relevant. Instead of teaching traditional or formal grammatical terminology to improve writing quality, we believe that extensive writing practice, along with consistent and relevant feedback, helps to produce fluent writing and accurate and effective grammar usage. Additionally, grammar should be integrated into the later stages of the writing process (e.g., editing) and be deemphasized in the planning, prewriting, and drafting phases so that these relatively lower-order concerns are not privileged over the exploration and development of ideas. For continued, in-depth discussion of teaching grammar and language, see Chapter 3.

8. Teachers Can Create a Classroom Writing Community. We have already mentioned publication (both in the classroom and in the wider community) as an important part of the writing process because it helps create authentic audiences. Another reason to publish student work within the classroom is that it has a community-building effect. Sharing writing through bulletin board postings, weekly “author’s chair” celebrations (Atwell, 1998), and class publications provides opportunities for classroom talk, peer-to-peer feedback, and, when publication is done within a positive context, the development of feelings of safety and an increased tendency to take academic and intellectual risks. While possibly no classroom will ever succeed in being a risk-free space, especially when grades have to be given, a teacher can create an instructional space in which students recognize that writing is a process during which they are expected to engage in inquiry and exploration and that this process does not always result in the most effective pieces of writing the first time around. Such a space can foster a collaborative, workshoplike environment instead of a competitive one in which stu-
9. Writing Should Extend throughout the Curriculum. Writing is one of the best tools for learning in many disciplines; therefore, writing can and should be incorporated in math, science, social studies, health, and any other subject area, both while students are learning new material and while they are reporting on what has been learned. Writing To Learn, Writing Across the Disciplines (WID), and Writing Across the Curriculum (WAC) programs have demonstrated these benefits of the writing process (Fulwiler & Young, 1990). English language arts teachers, by the nature of their professional expertise, may be called upon in their schools to mentor content area teachers who wish to incorporate more writing into their classes. We should relish and take full advantage of these opportunities to share our knowledge of the writing process and its connection to learning and cognitive, social, and emotional development.

10. Teachers Can Use Evaluation Constructively and Efficiently. Too many red marks can be counterproductive, both for the student writer who is tentative about the quality of his or her other skills and the teacher with 120 students a day and a limited amount of time for evaluating student writing. Instead of meticulous and extensive commenting to justify final grades, writing should be evaluated in terms of process with the goal of improvement, not judgment, in mind. This type of evaluation might include in-process student-teacher conferences, portfolio systems, “minimal marking” approaches that use a coding system such as checkmarks in the margins of papers to indicate errors (Haswell, 1983), grading only selected pieces, and peer or self-evaluation. Many contemporary compositionists support this view, stressing that overcommenting and a focus on evaluation instead of feedback can have a negative effect on students’ writing quality and their attitudes toward writing. There is a difference between providing feedback or commentary on student writing and assigning it a letter or numerical grade. While grading, like it or not, is required in most U.S. secondary schools, we can learn to be more effective when evaluating by accompanying grades with complementary response and using rubrics or scoring guides. When possible, evaluation should be more formative (during the process of writing) than summative (after the writing is complete) and more constructive than punitive.

Teachers should remember that grading has a political aspect in addition to a practical one. Grades, or “terminal evaluation” (Murray,
Chapter 2

1968), often reflect or enforce hierarchal relationships between students and teachers and can lead to a decrease in student confidence about writing if used in a punitive fashion.

Controversies in Writing Instruction

The characteristics of best practice in writing are not prescriptive; instead, they constitute an array of choices from which we can select based on our students’ needs. Within writing pedagogy, however, there are controversies that reoccur in discussions among English teachers and composition theorists. Not everyone shares the same views or defines best practice in the same way. Following are descriptions of some of the controversies that we have heard the most about in recent years.

1. Nonacademic Writing versus Academic Writing. Best practice tells us that we should help students find “real” reasons to write. But what are the parameters of this writing? Some theorists tell us that the only way to write in the English language arts classroom is by using academic genres (research essays, literary essays, and so forth), while others take a different perspective, encouraging students to write for what they call “authentic” audiences (research reports to local politicians, book reviews to be published in local newspapers, or memoirs written for family members). Advocates of academic writing seem to believe that secondary school writing is primarily a preparation for college-level writing, and students must learn how to write in academic genres in order to succeed at the next level. Proponents of writing for “real audiences” tend to be those with more of a writing-across-the-curriculum bent who believe that actual writing tasks have a more practical or rhetorical aspect; that is, writers write with a particular audience and purpose in mind, and an academic audience is not the one most students will be writing for in their adult lives. They argue that writing should prepare students for professional life and the writing tasks they will complete on the job as adults.

2. Evaluation and Response. Some English teachers see the final product as the ultimate goal of writing instruction and grade solely on final drafts and other final products. Others, however, put minimal emphasis on final work and develop systems of grading such as portfolios and scoring rubrics that emphasize work that leads up to the final product (drafts, prewriting, research activities, peer workshop group participation, and the quality of response to peers). Some see peer response groups as a way to polish final products and take care of minor editing
concerns, while others see collaborative groups as places to work on higher-order concerns (such as organization, development, and other large-scale issues) and prefer to leave the lower-order issues (spelling, grammar) for a later time. We think there should be a way to strike a compromise between these philosophical binaries.

Sometimes unconventional grading is equated with lax or minimal standards, and teachers who give primarily high grades (or who choose not to grade some student work) are seen as too “easy.” This linkage of traditional number or letter grades with high standards (and therefore student learning) is at the heart of this debate as administrators at both secondary and college levels voice concern over what they call “grade inflation” and the supposed negative effect it is having on student learning. Proponents of alternative grading practices, such as portfolios, argue that higher grades do not mean lower standards but instead often mean that students are achieving at higher levels because of improved pedagogical practices often directly linked to assessment strategies.

3. The Great Grammar Debate. The concept of Standard English is one near and dear to the hearts of many English teachers dedicated to the teaching of traditional grammar, usage, and mechanics. Standard English can be defined as that which is grammatically and mechanically “correct” according to handbooks and grammar textbooks. It is important, however, to remember that Standard English is spoken primarily by those with political, social, and economic power, and consequently our students’ speech often does not take this form. So what do we do? Do we give up the teaching of Standard English in favor of allowing students to write and speak in their own home dialects? This has been a debate in recent years partially because of the relationship between dialectical difference and race, ethnicity, or social class. If we believe that writing is based on the specific needs of the audience, then how can we tell whether the dialect or style being used is appropriate? And the bigger question: how do we succeed both in providing students with knowledge that will enable them to interact in professional contexts in which Standard English is required and in reassuring them that their home dialects are valued and important? Some colleagues ask students to write “memos” that accompany final written products explaining how the text meets the needs of the audience and hence explaining the use of dialects other than Standard English. Other teachers engage their students in discussions of Standard English and the sociopolitical contexts in which it might be privileged and the reasons for this privileg-
ing. In this way, Standard English is addressed as an ideological expression of social and economic class—not just as a set of rules to be remembered and enacted.

**Narratives**

Here we present four stories that focus on the teaching of writing by teachers of middle or high school English. We chose these narratives to represent the range of issues and situations that occur in a writing classroom. These narratives, and the subsequent responses from experienced teachers or teacher educators, should be used as opportunities to reflect on and discuss what it means to be a teacher of writing. As in the previous chapter, the responses are not prescriptive; instead, they are included to open up discussion and help readers develop their own theories about teaching writing.

The first story, “Why Won’t He Write?,” is concerned with one of the most common problems we encounter: encouraging a reluctant student to write creatively and join the classroom writing community. Do we push him and risk alienating him for the rest of the school year? Or do we “let him slide,” with the opposite danger of not helping him learn to write? The second narrative, “The Rite of Passage: Writing the Research Paper,” discusses a reluctant student working on a research project as his teacher seeks better ways to plan her writing assignment in order to increase his motivation and confidence. The third story, “Buried under the Paper Load,” discusses another common classroom concern: how does a teacher effectively respond to writing assignments when he or she might see more than 120 students each day? The fourth and last narrative, “Reviewing Peer Review,” tells the story of a teacher implementing peer review in her high school classroom and wondering how she can make the technique effective for all of her student writers.

**Writing Narrative 1**

Motivating students to write is one of the greatest challenges for English teachers. Here is one story about such a struggle that raises questions about approaching resistant writers. How can we set up our classrooms to inspire students to write? How can we overcome student apathy about writing? How can we urge students to join a classroom writing community? This story takes place in a small, rural high school in central Missouri where DJ is a senior in a creative writing class.
Narratives about Teaching Writing

Why Won’t He Write?

DJ would come to my creative writing class every day with no books, no paper, and no pencil. He would sort of slink into the room and slide into his desk a full two minutes before the bell rang. But he would be carrying nothing; his hands might be shoved into the pockets of his green plastic jacket. DJ was what you might call a reluctant writer. He seemed unable to sustain any independent fluent writing for more than a minute. Religiously, he would opt to go into the computer lab (which was next door to my classroom) to draft his papers, poems, and stories; however, few actual words would emerge on the screen. Instead, he would type a couple of words while I was looking over his shoulder, but as soon as my back was turned he would execute one or two computer clicks and be on the Internet or in a taboo chat room. Sometimes he would just sit and change the font and size of what he had written countless times until class was over. DJ was computer savvy, so he loved to sit in front of the screen and play. And, paradoxically, DJ loved to read and would often talk about long sci-fi novels he was currently engaged in. But writing? That was a different story for DJ. Consequently, he was quiet in class, well-behaved, and appeared to be on task, but rarely ever was. Sometimes it was easy to forget about DJ because outwardly he demanded little attention. In fact, he seemed to prefer being left alone.

This day is no different. We are working on a final draft of a Halloween story, a scary narrative that students usually love to sink their teeth into. Even though most of the class is in the revision or editing stage, DJ has yet to draft anything. Whenever I can find time, I work one-on-one with DJ (there are twenty-five other students in the class demanding my attention), trying to help him generate ideas. But I have had little success, as usual.

I walk over to DJ and sit down beside him. He sits transfixed in front of his Macintosh computer, staring at the displayed data, which I have no idea how he has accessed or even what it is. I ask him to show me what he has written, and he clicks back to the proper document. All he has written is “A DARK NIGHT,” but it is beautifully centered across the top of the blank page.

“That’s a great title. Where do you plan to go from here?”

“I don’t know.”

“Well, what might be the setting of this scary story? Who might a character be?”
I don’t know.” He performs a click with the mouse, eyes fixed on the screen. He opens the control panel and tinkers with the volume level.

“Tell me a scary story that you’ve heard before.”

“Well, there was the one about the man with the hook for a hand and the two kids in the car.” Click, again. DARK NIGHT changes into a symbolic pattern, ΔΑΡΚ ΝΙΓΗΤ. Click, and it morphs into a delicate script, DARK NIGHT.

“Okay. Is there any way you can modify that idea into a story of your own? Use it as a basis for your own story?”

“I could have the man with the hook be a vampire.”

“Okay. Go with that. Let’s write that down.”

With a sigh, DJ clicks back on his blank page and writes underneath DARK NIGHT, “There was a vampire with a hooked hand. On a dark night he found two teenagers . . .”

He seems to be on a roll.

“Good. Keep going.” Another student calls for me. I move away to help Amy with her story about a depressed werewolf. Five minutes later I look toward DJ’s computer. He’s in a chat room for Star Wars fans. I know he still doesn’t have a draft, and the final story is due tomorrow. He’ll fail yet another assignment. How in the world do I work successfully with DJ?

A Teacher Responds

This is a situation that I think every English teacher has been in at one time or another. Sometimes, despite what seem to be our best efforts, some students, for whatever reason, tend to resist whatever we are doing. I am going to offer some suggestions for the teacher, but first I want to discuss something not to do: become frustrated or angry. One of the initial reactions of novice teachers (and some experienced ones, too) is to turn the students’ lack of work into a personal matter (“I put together this great assignment and all he wants to do is go into a chat room. I would have loved this assignment when I was in high school!”). Resist this impulse!

After class, take a step back and then begin to consider the situation and look at some options. Talk to other teachers who know DJ; consult an English teacher listserv, Web site, or journal for ideas, and then begin to think about what to do next. This inquiry-based, reflexive approach to teaching encourages the teacher to analyze the pedagogical
problem instead of allowing emotion and frustration to guide decision making.

In this case, it looks to me as if DJ is having trouble getting started. Beginning a writing task, whether a story, essay, poem, or anything else, can be intimidating and frustrating. When I cannot start a piece of writing, I also tend to procrastinate, surfing Web sites or checking e-mail. I suspect this may be the case with DJ as well. It may be that the teacher has not provided enough support for the writing task or given opportunities for planning and prewriting activities. In an attempt to develop creativity, the teacher may not have provided enough guidance to the students concerning the writing assignment and the nature of the writing process (e.g., setting parameters, teaching the desired genre, developing and supporting prewriting and drafting exercises).

Although there might be other outside-of-the-classroom issues to deal with as well, I would recommend as a first step talking to DJ to find out why he is having trouble starting his story. Chances are he will say that he “has nothing to write about.” So I would give him some heuristics (e.g., story starters or prewriting strategies) as ways to think of ideas and supply him with strategies to help him develop some essential elements of his story to ease in his drafting. These strategies could include prewriting exercises such as listing or clustering in which he describes the setting and characters or visually maps a plot. From this point on, peer groups could be used to help DJ move from planning and prewriting to drafting and revision. These peer groups could provide oral and written response, in addition to the teacher’s response, on the developing draft. In this way, DJ begins to be acclimated to the classroom writing community; he engages in writing conversations with his peers and begins to feel like a fellow author. Perhaps he will begin to feel some ownership over his writing task instead of seeing it simply as something he is doing to satisfy the whims of his teacher.

Another point that should be made is that the narrative doesn’t explain what the nature of the initial assignment was. Did the teacher hand out an assignment sheet? If so, what did it say? If not, how was the assignment given? If the assignment was not given in a specific or detailed way, the teacher might consider crafting future assignments more carefully, taking into consideration planning, prewriting, and audience. With some modifications in pedagogical approach, the quality of DJ’s writing, as well as his attitude toward it, could be much improved.
A Teacher Responds

DJ reminds me of students I have struggled with over the years. Reluctant writers exist in our classes at all levels and across all content areas. Unfortunately, there isn’t a guaranteed recipe for helping them engage—at least I haven’t found one. What I have found, however, is that students who exhibit reluctance similar to DJ’s often do so because of their previous (and maybe current) experiences with writing. Finding out about these experiences and the pre(mis)conceptions that a student writer brings with him or her is usually a good place to start with resistant writers.

From the narrative, we might assume that DJ enjoys reading and understands the relationship between a reader and the written word. Unlike many of our reluctant writers, his resistance does not seem rooted in limited reading skills or a negative attitude toward reading. I wouldn’t rule these out, however, since the narrative doesn’t tell us much about DJ’s reading habits except that he loves to read and talk about science fiction novels. Learning more about his reading strategies and interests and about the ways in which he talks about whatever he reads could provide insight into his attitudes toward, experiences with, and habits in writing. I would like to know more about how DJ connects reading and writing. What relationships does he see between the processes? Why does he seem to retreat from writing yet engage with reading? Most teachers gather this information over time as they converse with students, listen to comments in class discussions, and observe behaviors in class. DJ’s teacher might want to conduct a more deliberate interview with him to learn more about the attitudes and expectations he brings with him into the writing class. The teacher might want to learn more about DJ’s digital reading and writing experiences as well, since DJ seems to choose these when given the opportunity. What intrigues him about surfing and participating in chat rooms? How actively engaged is he? What reading and writing does he choose to do when he surfs and chats?

In their studies of adolescent boys, Michael Smith and Jeffrey Wilhelm (2002) found that many high school boys feel that the use of electronic technologies provides them more control and possibility than they are given in typical school situations. The use of computers allows them choice and therefore a sense of competence. We don’t know enough about DJ from the narrative to know if his playing around on the computer provides the efficacy that he misses elsewhere, but this line of inquiry might help the teacher decide how to approach the next
writing assignment. Giving students more choice in both the topics they investigate and the genres they select could be a strategy that would engage DJ.

Like many teachers, DJ’s writing teacher might design the students’ writing assignments to meet curricular requirements. Offering students writing opportunities in which they select the topics they write about, the purposes and audiences for their writings, and the genres they believe are appropriate is difficult for many teachers to handle due both to the pressures they feel to “cover” requirements and to the management issues involved in such differentiation. DJ could be a student who needs such openness in order to engage, however. This does not mean he will not need a teacher’s support once he begins. Scaffolding is defined as providing instruction that helps students make connections between prior knowledge or interests and new information or expectations. Scaffolding writing instruction in a classroom in which each student is at a different stage in the process, is writing in different genres for different purposes, and is grappling with different writing problems can be a logistical nightmare for a teacher. Yet it can also be one of the most authentic and exciting environments for everyone involved in the classroom writing community if students are encouraged to collaborate and support one another. DJ’s teacher might want to explore writing workshop approaches and investigate how other writing teachers provide guidance to students within differentiated classrooms. The teacher also might explore how to use writing portfolios as a vehicle for offering students authentic choices while holding them accountable for the specified writing standards of the curriculum.

Until we know a little more about DJ’s skills and attitudes—his previous experiences with writing instruction in school, his current interests and habits in reading and writing both in and outside of school, his preconceptions about the processes involved in writing and about his own abilities—we won’t know if he needs more support (i.e., conferencing, questioning, brainstorming, mapping) in getting started with the writing task given to him or if he needs more choice and freedom in developing writing tasks that are meaningful to him. Writing scary stories is often an engaging activity for adolescent writers, so DJ’s teacher has not necessarily chosen unwisely for the assignment, but the teacher has been the one doing the choosing. This fact alone may serve to disengage a student writer who could become an eager participant in the classroom community if supported by the teacher in designing as well as completing writing experiences.
Choice and authenticity are two of twelve standards for effective learning that Phillip Schlechty (2002) recommends for overall school improvement. He describes how students respond to school tasks using five categories: authentic engagement, ritual engagement, passive compliance, retreatism, and rebellion. DJ’s behaviors in the preceding narrative are similar to Schlechty’s description of retreatism:

[T]he task has no attraction to the student, and the student is not compelled by other considerations to do anything active to support the task. The student simply withdraws—mentally and sometimes physically—from what is going on in the immediate environment. (p. 11)

DJ’s teacher may want to investigate what researchers are learning about the roles of choice and ownership in engaged learning. Like Schlechty, Harvey Daniels and Marilyn Bizar (1998) identify student choice as one of the “vital ingredients” necessary for genuine learning. Their suggestions for conferencing, forming classroom workshops, and embedding self-assessment into the daily routines of the class might offer a useful starting point for the teacher’s investigation.

For Further Discussion

1. What are some prewriting strategies that can be introduced to students? How do teachers know which ones are most appropriate? Which ones do you think might work most effectively with DJ? Thinking back to your middle and high school years, which ones do you think would have worked best for you?

2. What is your opinion of the teacher’s response to DJ’s lack of motivation? Do you think a more structured creative writing assignment, as the first respondent suggests, would detract from the freedom necessary for students to write creatively? Why or why not?

3. Hypothesize about the connections between reading and writing. Do you think a richer understanding of DJ’s reading habits could help the teacher encourage him to write? If so, how?

Learning Activities

1. Practice some prewriting activities the next time you write a paper: clustering or mapping, freewriting, listing, or outlining. Reflect on how useful they are for you. Then think about how you might implement such activities in a creative writing assignment for students.

2. Taking into consideration what you know about DJ, develop a writing assignment that you think he would enjoy.
Writing Narrative 2

Research writing is an important part of many English classrooms. Many teachers, however, accept the lockstep notions of the research process: note cards, bibliography cards, outlines, etc. But there are many ways to achieve the goals of a research project through more interesting and relevant means. Teachers could, for example, use alternative genres such as PowerPoint presentations and Web sites, or they could use a version of Ken Macrorie’s (1988) “I-Search” paper for which students develop real questions of interest to them and explore possible answers. In this case, we see a teacher struggle to engage a student in a traditional research process. What could she have done to make the project more meaningful? How could she have facilitated his writing process? This narrative takes place in a small high school in rural Virginia.

The Rite of Passage: Writing the Research Paper

The senior year research paper. A rite of passage. You could recite the assignment in your sleep: Choose a topic on which reasonable people could disagree. Explain the issue, discuss various perspectives, and then offer your own thoughtful opinion. Like those before them, my students would soon be able to reminisce about index cards, citing, bibliographies, footnotes, and endnotes. It was going well: students were writing about issues of gun control, euthanasia, abortion, even the environmental issues concerning stream management for livestock farmers.

Then there was Jason. He had taken to sitting in the far left corner, alone, with his head propped up against the cinder block wall. His six-foot frame stuck out at awkward angles. He talked to no one and either slept or made snide comments under his breath. He was beginning to unnerve me.

But he hadn’t always been that way. I remember seeing him during his junior year, often in conversation with his English or shop teacher before and after class. And in the beginning of this year, he had participated a lot, challenging ideas and thinking out loud. But by April, he had become sullen and his participation had waned. He had stopped handing in work, he rarely passed a test, and his grades were barely scraping by.

So when topics for the research paper were due, I wasn’t surprised that Jason didn’t have one. When the first round of research
cards was due and Jason didn’t have any, I was frustrated. It wasn’t that he couldn’t do it; he was just flat out refusing. As the students filed out one Friday afternoon, I caught his attention: “Jason, what’s up? I’m not getting anything from you.”

“I know, I know.” He extracted himself from the current of kids. “There’s nothing to do. It’s all so boring.”

“Well, let’s think. What are you interested in? This is a big part of your quarter grade. What are you really interested in?” I wanted to reach him, find a connection and bring him back.

He dropped his head back in bored exasperation; “I’ll have something Monday, okay? Can I go now?”

Monday before school, he poked his head in my room. “Ms. S., look.” He looked pleased, and I felt myself get excited. “Whatcha got?”

“Well, I want to do mine on the Titanic. It is so cool. I’m really into it as a ship, and just how it was so big. Just everything, I think it’s cool.” He had handwritten two pages in careful cursive, all about the Titanic (understand this happened well before Leonardo DiCaprio). As the words tumbled out of his mouth, I felt my insides tighten.

“Jason, that is cool. But what about the Titanic? The research paper has to deal with an issue.”

A heavy silence. “I don’t know. I just . . . this is what I want to do.”

The shuffling and morning chaos was getting louder outside my door. I could see my journalism kids pressing to get in. And then I turned back to Jason, leaned in, and tried to find a connection.

“Well, is there an issue about the Titanic? Something that would allow you to research the different arguments and then say what you think?”

He exploded: “You say you want me to do something I want to do and so I find something and now you say no!”

“I’m not saying no, Jason, what I am saying is there needs to be an issue, something that there are at least two sides to.”

“This is bullshit,” and he walked out, pushing his way through the kids in the hall.

Later, when we met in class, I approached him. I was firm but not cold. I repeated the guidelines for the research paper, gave him deadlines, which would catch him up, and told him I was available
if he wanted to conference about the paper. He said nothing in return and maintained his silence the rest of the year. He never did the research paper and failed the quarter.

A Teacher Responds

The research paper is the perennial “thorn in the side” of English teachers. Our curricula often require it, administrators and parents expect it, and we even see the value in such a project. But we cannot figure out how to convince students of its value. Even if students find topics they like, such as Jason and the Titanic, we have to push hard to get them to produce anything but a book report linking bits of information gleaned from library reference books. And then, if we throw in the bit about quoting versus paraphrasing (along with a dash of plagiarism paranoia), how to do a works cited page, and the proper way to write a note card, we lose our students altogether. Not only are they frustrated—they are bored.

So what might this teacher have done to motivate Jason? She could have allowed him to write the paper as he desired, and she probably would have received the aforementioned book report. Or she might have revisited her initial assignment and rethought how she presented the research paper to her students. Allowing Jason to spend more time prewriting and producing early rough drafts could have helped him focus his paper. Often students figure out what they really want to write through actually writing, but this discovery is dependent on being given the time to freewrite, create graphic organizers, and talk with peers. This teacher might also have considered encouraging her students to write about issues that have more immediate relevance in their lives and communities. Instead of writing about the Titanic, for example, Jason might have opted to explore whether success in high school athletics correlates with success in college athletics. With such topics, students might sustain their motivation longer for the project and with less prodding from their teachers.

Another path the teacher might have considered is structuring the research assignment similar to Ken Macrorie’s “I-Search” paper (1988). The I-Search assignment asks students to begin not with a topic but with a question they are genuinely interested in answering. Instead of being purely expository, the paper becomes more argumentative as students explore this question. They are not simply providing information about a topic; they are explaining why something is or is not a certain way. This focus on exploring a question provides a built-in thesis statement.
when students attempt to answer it. In Jason’s case, for example, instead of choosing the general topic of the *Titanic* he might have identified the question, “Why did the *Titanic* sink?” Or “Who survived the *Titanic* and why?” Consequently, his research path would have been more focused and potentially more thoughtful and satisfying as he conducted research in order to answer his question and report his findings to others.

*A Teacher Responds*

The problem in this scenario is essentially a power struggle. Jason seems to be a disaffected, unengaged student in conflict with the teacher who has aligned her goals specifically, and inflexibly, to the standards set by the curriculum. To diffuse this situation and ensure that Jason achieves some level of success, the teacher should contemplate the specific curricular goals in teaching the research paper and consider some alternate ways to achieve them in her students’ best interest. The students should have a sense of ownership in the development of their individual projects. Most important, Jason should have the opportunity to develop and refine his own voice in writing.

On reading this narrative, I was immediately transported back to my English classroom in Michigan, with twenty-five juniors staring blankly at me as I introduced the obligatory research paper in much the same way this teacher did. And there were always three or four Jasons sullenly resisting, questioning, and grumbling as I tried to cajole them into a state of even feigned interest in a topic suitable for outlining, note carding, footnoting, and writing.

Finally, I couldn’t take it. I spent a weekend reviewing the curricular guide, contemplating the goals for teaching the research paper. I thought about what I really wanted for my students. Did I want them to find out about something in which they were interested? Did I want them to learn about the finer points of research paper mechanics? Did I want them to learn how to critically evaluate sources? Then it dawned on me that I was thinking only about what I wanted, not what they wanted. Why shouldn’t I ask them? The next day in class we negotiated our goals for the project, and I spent five weeks learning with my students. In the end, the results far exceeded not only the expectations for papers I had received in past years but also the expectations we had set together in class.

Teaching “the research paper” is required of nearly every secondary English department. But often the research paper is also taught in another content area, or retaught in college, with different research and documentation criteria. Minutia of documentation and citation vary;
students learn early to make sure they produce what the teacher wants. Consequently, a teacher should think carefully about the goals of a research project within the context of this larger paradigm. Can these goals be achieved in ways that allow more student choice and creativity than the traditional “pick a topic from the list” research paper? Can a student, for example, fulfill the requirements of a research unit through multigenre projects, as outlined in Tom Romano’s *Blending Genre, Altering Style: Writing Multigenre Papers* (2000)? Are there interdisciplinary or service-learning opportunities that might lend themselves to the research project? Embedding the research in reality or riding on the coattails of another content area can ratchet up the interest level for an adolescent learner.

Perhaps we have an obligation to teach the research paper, but our obligation is also to differentiate instruction to reach all kinds of learners. When I invited my students to help establish the goals for our research unit, it became clear to me that the larger context of educating young people should not be subsumed into the short-term context of teaching note cards, bib cards, and works cited pages.

One of the most striking moments in this narrative is Jason’s attempt to share his ideas with the teacher. His interest in initiating the conference indicates that he is concerned about his progress and desires some level of success with the project. He is still in the discovery phase of writing and should be encouraged with affirming comments such as, “Wow, Jason, you’ve really thought about this!” followed by genuine questions on the teacher’s part (“Why did the *Titanic* sink? How did people react when they heard the news? Did they try to blame someone? Do you think someone was at fault?”) to help focus his interest without seeming judgmental. But the teacher, who was concerned about the students in the hallway, retreated to the “verbal red pen” of reiterated assignment guidelines, which limited Jason’s options for developing a clear topic and silenced his voice for the project.

Tom Romano in *Clearing the Way* (1987) and Nancie Atwell in *In the Middle* (1998) advocate discovery writing conferences in which the students do most of the talking. The teacher’s role is to listen and affirm the student’s exploratory thinking, perhaps jotting down ideas the student expresses verbally that may not have made it into the piece of writing just yet. The teacher in this narrative could have taken the time to listen carefully to Jason during the informal conference, and then asked questions rather than passing judgment. Questioning shows the teacher’s interest in both the student and the piece of writing he or she produced and also serves as a model for the inquisitive behavior edu-
cators hope students will exhibit during a research project. This teacher should have let the journalism kids stand out in the hall for a minute and focused on Jason’s attempt to finally make a connection. Taking just a few minutes to listen, engage in dialogue, jot down notes and phrases from the conversation on a sticky note, and give these thoughts to Jason would show him that his ideas are important, even if it means saying, “Jason, can you wait just a minute while I tell these journalism students to chill out there until I open the door?” And, in the end, even if Jason’s research paper wasn’t perfect, at least it would have been something. Is failing better than a C? Why should Jason be discouraged to the point of failure right from the start?

The next day in class the teacher’s “firm but not cold” reiteration to Jason of research paper guidelines clearly shows that there is no negotiation of power in this situation. She has control and Jason’s only options are either to conform or to further rebel and fail to complete the requirements for passing the marking period. But Jason already knows the guidelines and has already made his choice. Jason just wants his voice to be heard.

For Further Discussion

1. How would you have responded to Jason’s sudden interest in the Titanic? What might you have done to help him pursue the project and maintain his enthusiasm? Would you be willing to modify the assignment so that Jason would still do a research project but perhaps one slightly different from the one the rest of the class is doing? Do you think this would compromise the project’s integrity, or do you think the benefits to Jason would outweigh any problems?

2. What do you see as the goal of a high school research paper requirement? Why would a teacher include one in her curriculum? What do you think a student should learn as a result of such a project? In a small group, brainstorm reasons for assigning a research paper. Which seem most important? Least?

3. Think about the role of power and authority in the secondary English class. What kind of power or authority should a teacher hold? What types of power or authority should students be allowed to exhibit? Are there certain pedagogical contexts in which power and authority are more important or problematic? Why or why not?

Learning Activities

1. Thinking about your own experiences of writing research papers in middle or high school, devise an assignment sheet for
a research paper project. Building on your discussion of goals (see item 2 above), how would you guide students through the research process? What guidelines would you set for their final papers? Rubrics are lists of criteria that the teacher will evaluate when assessing a paper, as well as the number of points or percentages of value placed on each characteristic. Rubrics can be holistic, requiring teachers to assign one number or point value to a paper after reading the entire piece; analytical, breaking down the characteristics of the paper into various statements that describe necessary qualities (e.g., under “organization” a teacher might include such items as “has strong thesis statement, contains topic sentences, or uses adequate transitions”); or checklists that simply note if various tasks were completed. Create an assignment sheet and a rubric or scoring guide for the paper that shows how you would evaluate students’ work.

2. What alternatives can you think of for the traditional research paper? Make a list of different possibilities. These could include performance-based projects, visual projects, art projects, etc.

Writing Narrative 3

Most teachers hate to grade. The idea of putting scores on what we see as creative works can be very disconcerting—and time consuming. But grading is a necessity and unavoidable for most English language arts teachers. Many alternatives for grading exist, however, including process-oriented grading such as portfolios, and rubrics or scoring guides can make our task easier and evaluation more useful for students. In this story, we see a teacher who avoids grading and tries to focus on “bigger issues.” But in doing so, he sets himself up for some end-of-term difficulties. How can we strike a balance between graded and nongraded work? Which things should we grade? Which should we simply respond to? This story takes place in a midsize suburban high school in the upper Midwest.

Buried under the Paper Load

I remember my first year as a teacher. I was teaching ninth-grade English and loving it. My students were fun and full of life. I was teaching literature and writing that I enjoyed. My principal and department heads were both supportive and committed. It just seemed too good to be true. And then it happened. I guess I shouldn’t describe it
like that, as if it came upon me all of a sudden. It was more like a slow, suffocating death grip than a surprise. What I’m referring to, of course, is grading. The G word. As the first quarter came to a close, I looked at the “writing” portion of my grade book (a standard part of my school’s “language arts/English” block grade system) and realized that I had little numerically to show for all the work my students had done. I couldn’t give or justify grades for many of their assignments. Instead, all I had in the little green boxes were some checkmarks to show that things had been turned in. I knew I would be in trouble if someone questioned me on my grading scheme. The truth was, I didn’t really have a scheme. I started having nightmares about parents storming into my room waving unsatisfactory grade cards. The district grade sheet with its little bubbles to be filled in taunted me. I knew I had to do some grading.

I had boxes of dialogic journals and piles of ungraded poetry portfolios and essays that I had started to evaluate but stopped reading when I became frustrated with my arbitrary attempts to select a grade. How did I know if the work was an A or a B? The student had worked really hard on this one, so did that justify an A even if the quality was more of a B? What are an A and a B anyway? Sheesh. It seemed to me that the real work had already been done. The students had completed the assignments and learned from them. Why must I rank them? But despite my internal, philosophical aversion to grading, I knew I had to do it. The grade sheets had arrived in my mailbox, and they had to be completed and returned in one week. What was I to do? Give everyone an A? Give half the class As and half Bs? Quit my job and move to Cuba?

Well, I decided that none of those options would do, so I looked at the assignments my students had completed the first nine weeks. Students had written daily journals and kept literature response journals. They had also created poetry portfolios that included poems they liked and essays in response to these poems. I was thrilled with the progress of my students and the quality of their work. But I was flustered when it came to evaluating this work. The amount of paperwork was killing me. I had already spent hours responding to journals after school and reading some wonderful comments and discussions, but I wondered if students read my responses. But what if I didn’t respond? Would they think I didn’t care? Would they understand the importance of writing as a means of expression and think-
ing? And in addition, these responses I spent so many hours crafting didn’t provide what I now needed: numbers or letters to put on the grade report sheet. When students finished a writing project, I could respond, but when it came to evaluation, I was paralyzed. How could I grade a creative piece of work that was only a partial representation of an entire process?

Instead, I had let the papers sit on my desk and pile up, staring at me accusingly. Students were getting anxious, making comments such as, “Hey, Mr. B., when are we going to get those portfolios back?” and “Last year, Mrs. Jones always gave us our papers back the next day.” I knew I needed to grade these things. And now I had to do something fast. My time had run out. But what to do and how to do it? And how could I avoid this last-minute panic next quarter?

A Teacher Responds

Grading something as subjective as writing can be a daunting responsibility. As teachers develop and decide on methods or approaches to address this challenge, it might help first of all to realize that they are not alone in this difficulty. Judges have to decide between consecutive and concurrent sentences. Museum directors have to choose between differently beautiful paintings for an exhibit. Olympic diving judges need to quickly assess the scores on two seemingly equal dives. Football referees must determine whether a facemask penalty is intentional or incidental. And English teachers evaluate the quality of student writing.

Once we accept the idea that some kind of evaluation is needed, how best to proceed? One concept that is a necessary part of any system or method of grading is consistency. As teachers develop an approach to grading, maintaining a consistent application of their philosophy lets the students know what is expected, along with how and why. If the expectations are clearly explained and then adhered to consistently, the writing classroom can be a place of both process-oriented organization and individual, creative freedom.

Since writing instruction involves both process and result, the evaluation of writing should incorporate and reflect both. A system that includes regular conferences with some kind of student accountability during the process of working toward a final or “published” product and then allows the teacher or teacher and student together to make a decision about the success of that final copy can create a fair and understandable method of writing assessment.
After teachers have faced self-doubt or frustration and yet made decisions about writing evaluation, they should trust in their own developing expertise, and they should be able to articulate the decisions they make so that students clearly understand all the components of their classroom writing environment. Using analogies might help the students with this. The teacher might explain, for example, that the writing process could be compared to sports participation. Teams typically have scheduled workouts and practices, and some even encourage individual efforts on an athlete’s own time. And every organized team has regular games or matches. The writing classroom can use the same approach: the workouts can be various short writings, designed to practice or highlight specific writing skills or techniques, and they can be read or discussed in teacher-student conferences, with points or scores being given for the efforts and engagement during the process, while the “games” or “matches” can be the final writings, the results of the process and practice. Students learn that both the “workouts” and the “games” are important, even though they have different levels of expectations. Teachers can create grading systems that hold students accountable during all stages of the writing process, allow reward for active participation during the development of a piece of writing, and maintain appropriate expectations for a final product that reflect what students should be able to do, given their abilities and instructional objectives.

Even though it is difficult, teachers should not be afraid to face the grading/assessment challenge. Know who you are, your style and philosophy, and your goals as a teacher of writing. Try to be fair and consistent, clear, and confident. A former principal of mine, who taught instrumental music before becoming an administrator, once asked me, “How can you decide whether an essay deserves a B or a C? It seems so subjective.” I responded, “When you taught music, how could you decide who would be second or third chair in the trumpet section?” He indicated that his trained ear, his musical knowledge, and his understanding of the range of abilities possible at the level of high school musicians all assisted him in making that seemingly fuzzy decision. Exactly.

A Teacher Responds

What new teacher hasn’t found him- or herself overwhelmed and confused about grading and assessing student work? Early in his career, this teacher saw assessment and instruction as being at odds and viewed grading as a sort of necessary evil imposed on him by people who had
little sense of classroom realities. Unfortunately, many share this belief. Becoming clear about the ways that assessment and instruction are inextricably linked can make or break you as an English language arts teacher.

I see grading as part of planning. It’s not something to think about at the end of an assignment, a unit, or a course, but one of the first things to consider when planning them. You’ve got to think about the judging before you teach, and then you’ve got to do the teaching before you judge. What I’ve learned through trial and error (and trust me, I mean lots of error!) is that the more thought, effort, and planning I can do in advance related to grading and evaluating student work, the better experience the class ends up being for both me and the students. Let’s face it; if standards for evaluation are a mystery to us as teachers, they’re going to be a mystery to our students. When we are clear about our goals and objectives and share them explicitly, more kids are likely to reach them.

It’s a matter of getting the gestalt, of creating (and sharing) the bigger picture before we assess. How can we go about doing this? In general, grading considerations are similar whether you’re planning individual assignments, entire units, or ways to determine students’ overall grades for a class. Questions to ask yourself include the following: What are the overall goals or aims of the course, unit, or assignment? What are the specific learning outcomes for each? Which assignments are really important, will require the most of students, and will be allotted the most class and/or outside time and effort? (Think unit tests, longer writing assignments, more formal projects or presentations, etc.) These are the ones that deserve the most weight when grading and merit the most careful feedback and response from you as a teacher. This work might add up to 65 percent or so of the student’s overall grade in the course. Which assignments are minor ones (check tests, short quizzes, daily work, etc.)? Daily work might simply be checked off as done and meeting minimal competency, receiving little or no response from you as the teacher. This work might add up to, say, 15 percent of a student’s overall grade in the course. Will you choose to include students in the classroom assessment equation through self-evaluation? How will you factor in attendance, participation, and professionalism? (I value both a lot, so assign 10 percent to each of the two categories.)

Once you’ve determined your goals and objectives, decided on learning activities, and assigned relative weights and values to each, share them with students on a class syllabus. This will help them see the overall plan for the course and will be useful to them (and to you!)
in remembering which things are most important in the class and therefore merit the most attention, time, and effort.

Those are the bigger, more general considerations and the ones to decide on first. Next you’ve got to figure out how to go about grading the major assignments you’ve identified as integral to your course. In a classic 1967 article titled “Teaching before We Judge: Planning Assignments in Composition,” Richard Larson describes steps I’ve found helpful in designing, explaining, and grading specific writing assignments, including the following:

1. Plan the assignment, unit, and course, at least in broad outline form, in advance.
2. Analyze each prospective assignment carefully before you give it. Consider what students will need to know in order to do well on the assignment.
3. Decide what you must teach now in order to ensure students a fair chance to do well on the assignment.
4. Determine what your standards of evaluation on the assignment will be.
5. Draft a written bulletin describing the assignment (or for minor assignments, draft the notes you will use in giving the assignment orally).
6. Explain the assignment to students fully, including standards for evaluation.
7. (A step I add to Larson’s list and find important), provide examples and nonexamples of previous students’ work on the assignment.
8. As part of your explanation of the assignment, allow time for students’ questions and be ready to point out the pitfalls and difficulties they might encounter as they work on the assignment.
9. In evaluating and commenting on papers, make special note of where the student has and has not succeeded in reaching the explicit objectives of the assignment.
10. Discuss the assignments with students when you return them.

And finally, don’t be afraid to ask students to rewrite.

Steps 4, 6, and 7 of this process tend to be especially challenging for new teachers. One resource that high school teachers might find useful in establishing a framework for classroom writing assessment is NCTE’s Standards Exemplar Series: Assessing Student Performance: Grades 9–12 (Myers & Spalding, 1997). This guide translates the NCTE-IRA standards into exemplars showing student performance on on-demand
tasks in particular language situations and into portfolios showing student performance on a range of tasks over time. Levels of performance are described through (a) descriptions of on-demand tasks, which represent one or more of the principles in the content standards and which have been tried out in many classrooms; (b) grade-level exemplars of student work on specific tasks requiring particular kinds of knowledge in the English language arts, such as writing reports or responding to literature; (c) rubrics describing the different achievement levels for a given task and situation; and (d) commentaries showing the relationship of each sample to the rubric. Three achievement levels—high, middle, and low—are presented for each on-demand task. This book can be helpful to beginning teachers in determining standards of evaluation on particular assignments and in providing examples and nonexamples of previous students’ work on such assignments.

For Further Discussion

1. What is the difference between grading and response? Is this difference significant? How could an awareness of such a difference affect a teacher’s writing pedagogy?

2. If you were this teacher’s mentor, what advice would you give him to help him at the end of the next grading cycle? How could he set up his class to allow for both effective response and the necessary grades?

3. What are the pros and cons of using a rubric or scoring guide? How can a rubric help students and teachers? Can you think of any situations in which a rubric might be problematic?

Learning Activities

1. In a small group, brainstorm a list of types of writing that should be graded and a corresponding list of writing that you think should not be graded. Then begin to discuss why you have placed the types of writing in the categories that you did.

2. Many teachers create a philosophy of teaching, and in this book you are urged to create your own. Part of such a philosophy often concerns grading issues. Write a short grading philosophy that describes your views of grading in the secondary English classroom, including a definition of grading, why teachers do it, and what connection it has to student learning.

Writing Narrative 4

A staple of good writing instruction is often the use of peer review groups. The purpose of such groups is twofold: (1) to demonstrate to
students that writing is a social process and that the responses of readers can be important and useful in determining the effectiveness of a piece of writing, and (2) to help students internalize the evaluation of writing and give them practice in responding to actual texts as well as reflecting on responses provided to them by their peers. But the implementation of peer review groups in the secondary classroom is often much more difficult than it at first appears. Sometimes students use the time in groups to socialize, come to their groups unprepared, or fail to take the activity seriously. The following story narrates the peer review process in one tenth-grade classroom as the teacher attempts to make it instructive for all her student writers. This narrative takes place in a school of about 1,300 students in a suburb of Seattle.

**Reviewing Peer Review**

While I hear my voice saying, “Okay students, get out your drafts. It’s time for peer review,” I feel my body preparing for the challenge that will follow. I review in my head: we did lots of prewriting and planning activities, we discussed topic selections, we held workshops, we had drafting time in class and time outside of class, I was available for help, I have a plan for the peer review, and we’ve gone over it. I’ve thought of everything, haven’t I? Ideally, this *should* work. But experience tells me that all of this doesn’t matter because in seconds the reality of the classroom will hit. “You have your peer review sheets. Find a partner and exchange papers. Let’s get started.” Now.

“Mrs. D., I don’t have my draft with me. I left it at home.”

“I don’t have one either. I never finished what we started in class. Can we go to the commons to write?”

Oh, I’m sure that’s what will happen there. Okay, get the ones with no draft started writing. Then make sure everyone has a partner and has started on the peer review.

“Mrs. D., will you do my peer review with me? I don’t have a partner.”

Doesn’t have a partner, or doesn’t want one? A lot of these students don’t believe a peer can really help them with their writing; after all, what does another fifteen-year-old know about it? And the two girls from Russia are paired up—again. Their language skills aren’t the best, and they refuse to work with others who might help them, but they don’t know how to help each other, either! Who can I move around to get them some help?
“Mrs. D, who can I work with?”

Katie? What a sweetie. But Katie is a special education student who has no understanding of the concept of a sentence, let alone other aspects of writing. It’s hard for a partner to feel she’s getting help back from Katie—and it is not easy to help her learn to write. Maybe Sara?

Okay, who else? Barbara doesn’t have a partner and is just sitting there. She’s told everyone that she’s a witch, albeit a good one; it’s her religion. Still, she has many of the students nervous—and she doesn’t make any overtures either. Who can I get to work with her?

Move around to the groups. Oh, this makes me laugh inside. I love how when I come close to the students the topics change abruptly from the dance or whatever the newest gossip is to some comment about the writing that doesn’t make any sense at all. They must think I’m naive as well as deaf and blind. But then, I know many of them have been trained by past experience to see this as a social time. How do I change years of poor experience with peer review? They really believe this is time just for talking.

“Mrs. D., I’m done. Will you initial this?”

“Boy, that was fast, Mike. Let me look at it. Your comments on the paper are pretty skimpy. Can you give some elaboration on some of these? And you can’t answer the question ‘What was the most effective use of imagery and why did it work?’ with ‘yes.’ See if you can give some comments that will help your partner really improve the paper, okay?”

And there’s another sign that this is simply an exercise for many of them—the time and thought they put into it. How do I convince them? Keep moving around the room.

Some of these students are really doing a nice job, really helping to improve the writing. Yes! “Good insights, Brad. I think you should take this advice, Terry.” I love this part. How can I make it work for the rest of them? And what is Jason doing under the table again? Keep moving.

A Teacher Responds

The stream of consciousness technique this teacher uses to tell her story shows the reader a lot about the difficulties inherent in using peer review in the secondary classroom. She lets us hear her thoughts as she circulates the room on peer review day, and we see students engaging in many behaviors that all of us are probably familiar with: the use of peer review time for socializing, lack of trust in the peer review pro-
cess, the difficulty of pairing up students in ways that are mutually beneficial, and the tendency for students to rush through the process in order to simply “get done.” While peer review has been much touted in professional literature since the 1970s, I often hear teachers at all levels describe the difficulties they have implementing it with any success. I have even heard teachers say they have given up doing peer review because they see at as a waste of time.

So what can these teachers, as well as the teacher in this narrative, do to improve the outcome of peer review? First, I think the teacher might rethink the way she assigns partners for the process. According to the narrative, it appears that the teacher allows the students to pick their own partners, which leads to students choosing friends or to certain students being partnerless time and time again. How about numbering students off or using some other random process to assign partners? Another idea is to ask students to write down (confidentially) on a sheet of paper three peers they would like to work with; then the teacher uses the sheet to assign partners, trying to give students one of their three top choices. This technique allows students some power in choosing, but it also allows the teacher to have a voice in the process and use her knowledge of students’ educational needs and how they interact in her class.

I would also suggest thinking about using larger groups, perhaps groups of three or four instead of two. While this increases the time needed for peer review, I think it can alleviate some of the problems the teacher describes. In a group of three or four, for example, a student like Katie might feel less pressure to give complex responses to papers, and the other students in her group might feel that they have received more thorough feedback. Also, a larger group might help with the lack of response, as demonstrated by Mike. If a larger group is used, the teacher could encourage more talk about the papers before the students write comments for the author. Such increased talk might lead Mike and others like him to feel that he has more to say once it comes to writing things down.

Of course, a larger group might actually increase one of this teacher’s problems—the use of peer review time for pure socialization. This problem is a tough one. Honestly, I don’t think teachers can ever completely stop students from talking about things unrelated to their writing while they are in peer groups, and I don’t think they should necessarily want to stop it. Such social talk can increase feelings of community that can lead to more productive group work. I do think the teacher is doing some things to help mitigate this problem, such as cir-
culating among the groups and monitoring their progress as much as possible. One other thing she might try is assigning “roles” to different groups members, much like those used for literature circles (see Chapter 1). One student might be given the role of group leader and her or his job might be to keep the discussion moving along in a productive, relevant way. This student could consult the peer review guide or sheet to help with this task. Other students might assume the roles of note taker, organization specialist, grammarian, thesis detector, etc. In this way, students are held more accountable for their actions in peer review groups.

I’m glad this teacher shared descriptions of students in her class who were engaging in the process successfully. Sometimes it is easy to focus on the negative and forget the good things that are going on in our classes. Perhaps these students could role-play an effective peer review session in front of the whole class in order to demonstrate how it could be done successfully. Such a demonstration can serve the additional purpose of celebrating these students’ mastery of the process.

A Teacher Responds

Successful peer reviewing involves a great deal of time preparing students and setting patterns of behavior. I don’t think it’s enough to give students written guidelines to follow or worksheets to complete during the process. Often the biggest problem is that teachers have simply not spent enough time showing students what to do. The inherent goal of peer review is to encourage students to engage in various discourses about their writing process and developing drafts. I admire Mrs. D.’s persistence and commitment to this ideal but would suggest that she establish acceptable patterns of behavior early by modeling various workshop formats in class, assigning students to ongoing writing groups, writing in-class discovery drafts, and allowing writing groups some choice in adopting their group’s workshop format.

Students often don’t know exactly what it means to “workshop” a piece of writing and can spend half the class period fidgeting through the process, as this teacher has so perfectly described. Even then, students are often puzzled by exactly what they are expected to do and how this is beneficial for them. If, however, specific workshop formats (such as discovery conferencing, revision workshops, and editing/proofreading workshops) are carefully modeled, then the expectations for behavior and the goals of workshopping are clearer. Mrs. D. could take a piece of her own writing and have students help her revise it on an overhead. As students offer suggestions, she can take the opportu-
nity to clarify the workshop expectations, help students learn how to make positive and productive suggestions, and congratulate students on good ideas and suggestions in order to emphasize how they can help one another.

She might also ask for volunteers to role-play different kinds of writing groups and maybe even bring in some adults to enact different scenarios for students. In either case, participants could dramatize various types of writing groups: one in which the writer reads without offering any elaboration of text or ideas, one in which the writer looks for a central focus by talking through a rough draft, one in which a writer must pose three questions about his or her piece to the rest of the group, one in which the group must reach consensus on three suggestions for the writer, one in which the writer is not allowed to make any comments while another member reads his or her piece aloud, or any other format that the teacher (or students) thinks is appropriate. Or a writing group could be videotaped, and the class could critique the ways in which the group interacted. If we expect our students to conduct effective peer conferences, then we must teach the art of conferencing, just as we teach the craft of writing, and allow students the opportunity to reflect on the purpose of writing workshop.

I would also suggest assigning students to groups of four early in the semester rather than allowing students to partner up, and having the groups meet on a regular basis to establish rapport and continuity. This way the students get to know one another’s writing styles and areas of interest and can trace the development of particular pieces. Also, and very important, this strategy establishes some of the expectations and patterns of behavior that have been modeled to make sure they are understood by each group member. Ideally, if the groups meet regularly (once a week? every other Friday? once a month?), they will not have so much “catching up” to excessively chatter about, although I firmly believe that the various discourses inherent in any group activity are essential in creating rapport and community. And with four members, if someone misses class or does not have anything to share, there are still enough participating members to ensure some interaction during the workshopping session.

The groups could be given a choice of workshop format options that the teacher has previously modeled and even a choice of materials on which to focus. I believe it is crucial to allow students to workshop their discovery writing as well as more formal writing assignments. The piece for workshopping doesn’t always have to be homework, which invariably some students will not complete. Journal topics, freewriting,
questioning, and anything else from class is acceptable material for a workshop, particularly at first when the point is to learn the techniques of the writing conference, not necessarily to work on revising an important piece. If groups practice with pieces and in the group format of their choice, they can develop a higher sense of purpose, authority, and therefore commitment within their groups; when the time comes to workshop a research paper or required writing assignment, students are more prepared to do so.

I think it is worth devoting the necessary class time to emphasize the importance of such activities, including the time that is inevitably spent in conversation. It’s a catch-22 of sorts; a teacher should either spend ample time to significantly explore the values and outcomes of peer workshopping or not waste the time spent on less effective methods that actually undermine the process. I once read that developing and adapting any new method into a classroom practice takes at least ten tries. Maybe that’s why it’s called practice. In the end, helping students to develop successful peer workshops is worth the time spent in teaching the procedure and building rapport. I applaud Mrs. D. for persevering, advise her to keep experimenting with options and procedures, and encourage her to involve students in developing the workshop format that best serves their needs.

For Further Discussion

1. In your opinion, what is the role of talk in the secondary classroom? When is it frivolous? When is it important to learning? How do teachers know the difference?
2. What are the goals of peer review? Do you think it should be conducted in the secondary English classroom? Why or why not? If so, are there particular assignments for which it is more applicable?
3. What are some of your memories of collaborative work in high school? When was it effective or enjoyable for you? When was it ineffective? Why?

Learning Activities

1. Create a peer review guide or sheet that you could give to middle school or high school students as they begin the peer review process. What would it say? What kinds of guiding questions or instructions would you give students? Why?
2. In your classroom or in a field experience, experiment with different procedures for grouping students for peer review. For example, (1) allow students to choose groups, (2) choose them
yourself in different ways and (3) vary the size of groups. What differences do you see in the effectiveness of peer review as conducted in each of the groups? Do you think the differences were due, at least in part, to the ways the groups were constructed? How do you know?

In Closing

In this chapter, we have discussed some concepts that are often considered best practices in secondary writing instruction, and we have explored briefly some key controversies. Mostly, however, we have shared stories of teachers as they enacted some of these pedagogical methods and experienced professional dilemmas. Motivating reluctant writers, assigning alternative projects, evaluating effectively, and teaching the writing process through peer review are only a few of the characteristics of effective middle and high school writing teachers. Our point is not that our readers should try to imitate the strategies or approaches suggested by the teacher-responders. On the contrary, we believe that each teacher should develop his or her own understanding of best practice and create a repertoire of strategies that can make those practices come to life in English language arts classrooms.

Our concluding activity asks you to write a philosophy of teaching writing. Write a short (no more than one page) statement describing your philosophy of teaching writing. Begin to answer some of the following questions as you describe your current or future classroom practices in teaching writing and the beliefs that guide them:

1. What kinds of writing do I want students to be able to complete successfully?
2. What is the role of the academic essay in my classes? How will I develop and use authentic audiences and alternative genres?
3. How do I define the writing process? How can I teach my students to develop their writing through process-based activities such as peer review?
4. How much writing will my students do collaboratively? What is the appropriate use of collaboration in my classroom?
5. What is my role as a responder and evaluator of my students’ writing? When do I want to focus on editing issues such as spelling, grammar, and mechanics? When should I consider higher-order issues of audience, organization, and content?
Additional Texts about the Teaching of Writing

Books


This is a book of cases or stories depicting different events, issues, or problems that university writing instructors commonly face, along with questions for discussion.


This collection of essays describes and discusses portfolio assessment in secondary schools and its pedagogical and political implications.


Bleich takes a postprocess approach to writing pedagogy and explores how writing classrooms and student language use are affected by the material realities of students’ lives, including socioeconomic, cultural, racial, ethnic, and gender identities. Bleich also explores the grading of student writing through a postmodern lens and how classroom “discomfort” can sometimes be the catalyst for learning.


A landmark book outlining a student-centered writing pedagogy, Elbow’s text focuses on peer response groups and prewriting/invention strategies. This is a wonderful introduction to process writing and how to teach students to provide substantive feedback in writing groups.


This book translates classical rhetoric and Toulmin’s model of argument into clear, accessible language and suggests ways they
can be incorporated in the high school writing class. It includes discussions of claims, fallacies, and logic.


Harris provides theory and rationale for conference teaching as well as specific suggestions for conducting effective writing conferences with students. This text is a practical application of composition pedagogy to the teacher-student conference or tutorial.


Hillocks takes an innovative look at the writing process and defines both writing and teaching as processes of inquiry that can be improved on through reflective thinking. He suggests teachers use “frame experiments” to craft classroom activities, try them out, and then assess their effectiveness in helping students learn to write.


This readable and entertaining book provides numerous practical revision strategies for secondary students, including “exploding a moment” and “shrinking a century.” Lane’s ideas are crafted more with the middle school student in mind, but his creative approach and emphasis on narrative writing has much secondary classroom potential.


Lanham offers practical suggestions for tightening and revising prose, including his “paramedic method” and other sentence-based strategies. Although he focuses on sentence-level issues, his emphasis is on improving style, not just on issues of editing or correctness.


Lindemann outlines what secondary English teachers should know about rhetorical history and theory and why knowing it will improve their practice. In addition to giving a brief history of classical rhetoric, she applies many of the ideas to the contemporary English class.

This book is often cited as a groundbreaking text in composition studies. It is a discussion of various forms of research and inquiry that are conducted in the discipline and how each of them has enriched understandings of the teaching of writing. One of North’s goals is to establish composition studies as a discipline by outlining the most significant research and related theoretical positions of those who teach and study writing. He also succeeds in giving a nice overview of the types of research (for example, qualitative, experimental, and textual) compositionists conduct in their field.


This landmark text examines how common errors in student writing can be linked to an underlying logic that can be identified, and modified, through error analysis and focused instruction. Shaughnessy’s goal is to see basic writers not as less intelligent than their “regular” counterparts but as simply working from their own set of language rules that do not correlate with those of Standard Edited English.


Soven’s textbook includes chapters on teaching the writing process, creating assignments, responding to student texts, and evaluating student work in the middle and secondary school. Overall, the text is an effective and readable introduction to the discipline of English education and the practice of English teaching.


Contributors to Tchudi’s book explore ways to respond to and evaluate various kinds of student texts in nontraditional ways. Some ideas include parent response, peer response, outcomes-based assessment, and portfolio assessment.


This text, similar in structure to Soven’s, includes pedagogical and theoretical guidance for secondary school teachers of literature.
and writing, including discussions of instructional planning, reader response to literature, teaching grammar, and the writing process.


This book is a collection of essays describing and providing models for university-secondary school collaboration concerning the teaching of writing. Issues addressed include preservice teacher education, definitions of effective writing at secondary and postsecondary levels, and ways secondary and university faculty can work together to better prepare student writers for professional life.


This famous text about writing effectively is noteworthy for its attention to clarity and style as well as to the complexities of the writing process. A must-read for student and adult writers, Zinsser speaks as a skilled writer giving advice to would-be authors.

**Electronic Resources**

The National Writing Project
www.writingproject.org/

The National Writing Project started with a single institute for inservice teachers in Berkeley, California, in 1972 and has grown to include 175 sites in all fifty states, Washington D.C., Puerto Rico, and the U.S. Virgin Islands. The project began as a grassroots effort to encourage “teachers to teach teachers” about the composing process and writing to learn. The Web site includes access to NWP publications, presentations, workshops, institutes, and support networks.

Purdue University Online Writing Lab (OWL)
http://owl.english.purdue.edu/

This Web site includes online tutorials for student writers and provides access to instructional materials for teacher use.
Narratives about Teaching Writing

Writing Across the Curriculum
www.engl.niu.edu/wac/

This Web site includes a brief history of the Writing Across the Curriculum (WAC) movement and provides links to related sites. Teachers interested in WAC should also consult the books of Toby Fulwiler (1987, 1990 [with A. Young]).

The Writing Instructor
http://writinginstructor.com

The Writing Instructor is an online journal about the teaching of writing at all developmental and grade levels. It includes interactive chats, video, images, Web links, and traditional written texts about writing instruction.