

Strategic Writing

The background of the cover is a painting of a vast, arid desert landscape. The ground is rendered in warm, textured brushstrokes of orange, red, and brown. In the distance, there are low, reddish-brown hills under a clear, bright blue sky. A single, narrow, blue road with white dashed lines runs diagonally from the bottom right towards the center of the image. At the end of this road, a small, dark, rounded figure stands, looking out over the horizon. The overall style is expressive and artistic.

The Writing Process and **Beyond**
in the Secondary English Classroom

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1 Becoming Strategic

There is no master list of . . . strategies.

James Collins

When I was a young teen, skateboards became the “in” thing for my neighborhood. I watched the friends who got the first ones, watched them race down the hills of the subdivision shrieking and laughing, and I wanted that freedom, that speed, that wind in my face. I saved up enough money and bought myself one—chartreuse green.

The first time I tried to ride my skateboard, I crashed and scraped my knees and feet. Back then we rode barefoot to get a grip on the board—this was, after all, the olden days when skateboards first came out and weren’t so fancy as they are today. No helmets or knee pads. No trick boards. The idea was to get a good long ride.

I tried again and again, without success. I always crashed. My friends told me better places to stand on the board and how to shift my weight. I tried their suggestions and a few of the strategies I had thought up at night, just before sleep, as I was thinking about trying again the next day. Eventually, I was able to ride down the hill, all the way, without crashing. It was just what I’d imagined (except for the serious vibrations caused by metal wheels on rough pavement). It was speed and wind and freedom—and it only took a week or so and a bunch of skin and blood to figure it out. It was wonderful!

Most of us are strategic beings by nature. When we want something enough, we find ways to accomplish our goal. What we do in the process is consider, try, and discard ideas—strategies—until we find what brings success. Current publications about reading are replete with examples of reading strategies, practices that help readers improve their literacy skills by emulating the things that better readers do as they read. Such an approach to reading builds on the idea of our being strategic, especially with complex processes, of making strategies conscious tools to be used when they are suitable. When I read articles about being a strategic reader, I substitute the word *writing* for *reading*, and the ideas still fit. The same rationale for being a strategic reader applies to being a strategic writer.

Strategies are tools. As with reading strategies, writing strategies are practices that experienced writers use to accomplish their varying purposes in writing. One of the primary strategies teachers today have

at their fingertips is the writing process—but it isn't often used strategically.

Some of us probably still remember the really old days: days when teachers gave a writing assignment during Monday's class—the weekly theme—and we wrote it at home, alone, and turned it in on Friday. We wrote by hand, in ink, and recopied when we recognized mistakes. The papers were returned, generally on Monday, with our grade indicated by a red letter on the top. Sometimes we received two grades, content over mechanics, but the scores were generally unaccompanied by any comments (although the paper may have had errors in punctuation, spelling, or grammar corrected), and we looked at the grade and then put the paper away as we listened to the teacher make a few comments and give us the current week's topic. We were on a treadmill. What happened between Monday and Friday was up to us, as long as a clean, error-free paper was turned in at the end of the week. It seems now like an old black-and-white movie.

The Writing Process Movement

Research into writing helped change that picture. Composition scholars such as Janet Emig and Donald Graves, looking at what writers do as they write, began to note that writing was a recursive process, that most writers went through a number of stages as they wrote, and that these stages could be generically labeled to help beginners adopt a process that should enable them to write more effectively, more like experienced writers. In the writing process, as it came to be known, these stages were identified generally as prewriting, drafting, and revising. Within each of these general stages were a number of subprocesses (Flower and Hayes identified several in their research), but the main idea was that following this general process would improve writing. Peter Elbow's *Writing without Teachers* influenced a generation of teachers by promoting this perspective. From this beginning, the concept of writing as process took on a number of other features and aspects in classrooms across the country, carrying with it all sorts of assumptions and political issues.

The writing process movement focused attention on a number of concerns in positive ways. First, attention to process encouraged teachers to spend time on different aspects of that process, particularly prewriting. Now, before beginning to write, students brainstormed, used heuristics, created webs, and followed a number of other patterns designed to help them select, focus, and develop topics. Revision also re-

ceived some attention from the writing process movement; teachers now had students help each other by making suggestions for improvement in their writing before they handed it in.

Another consequence of focusing on the process was that students, with their individual processes and ideas, gained importance and prominence. More emphasis was placed on writing for and about self, and more assignments linked student writing to student experience. This attention to students, in turn, shifted emphasis to different elements of writing. Although spelling, grammar, and punctuation might be important (at some later stage), they didn't matter so much as ideas and self-exploration. Even more important was voice. The process was about the individual—and the individual was represented best by voice and unique ideas.

Because attention focused on writers as real people with individual voices, more assignments addressed audiences outside of the teacher as a way to encourage authentic writing. Peers became one audience, partly through increased use of peer review. More opportunities for “publishing” were also considered as students wrote for school and class publications as well as for audiences in the community.

Eventually, though, deficiencies in the way this movement translated into practice became apparent. Despite the original intent that process be recursive, in the classroom, process began to look a lot like the old black-and-white movie, only with more detail: Monday was prewriting, Tuesday was drafting, Wednesday was revision, Thursday was editing, and Friday was publishing. A new pattern had taken the place of the old—and, in some ways, it isn't surprising. What happens to the individual writing process when it goes to school? It generally gets put into a pattern that fits school more than the individual.

In many classrooms, observers noted that the process began to take the place of a quality product; papers that showed evidence of all the steps of the process were automatically given top grades. (After all, the premise was that process would improve writing, so it must follow that papers following the process were better.) Talk of quality, of what makes effective or ineffective writing, was absent from many classrooms (Baines et al.).

Additionally, for many teachers, the content of writing was primarily personal experience. With younger students, that meant that substantive writing was sometimes significantly lacking because experience was limited. Although the writing process movement encouraged the implementation of more prewriting strategies, inquiry was really a matter of exploring what an individual already knew, not learning *about*

something new. More and more writing became self-revelation, with some students even imagining life experiences to establish the effect they felt was the desired product in such classes (DeJoy).

Finally, the way many secondary teachers used the writing process in the classroom seemed to neglect the social component of writing, despite peer revision. More current research has investigated the complex social aspects of writing neglected by an emphasis on the individual: that writing, like oral language, is discourse, a communicative act that must consider the writer and the audience as well as the circumstances for the discourse. (A look at Carolyn Miller's writings, along with those of Bill Cope and Mary Kalantzis and of Aviva Freedman and Peter Medway, would be a good start to understanding the social perspective of composing.) But many classrooms focused so much on the individual aspect of the process that the social aspect was largely ignored. Process was a sequence of activities, and as I had my students walk through that process, it just seemed longer than the old way. I caught myself wondering if the process shouldn't change writing in some elemental way, not just stretch out the same old thing. Shouldn't the writing process be a strategy?

Recently a college student came up to me after a presentation and asked why his teachers had never presented the idea of the writing process as strategy: "All I thought was that I had to do a draft before the final, but it was just what they said to do. No one ever explained that there was a reason for doing the other things teachers asked us to do."

I wondered if some of my students might think the same thing: Despite my efforts to use process as a strategy, might they see it only as a sequence of activities leading to a product that was a dead end? I replied that teachers might have actually tried to teach this but maybe just didn't get the message across. I hope that's the case, at least. I hope it's not that we've missed the point of a writing process.

Developing Strategies

What I *think* the process should be in classrooms is a process of using strategies to accomplish a goal. And in order to be strategic, students need to stop thinking of prewriting, drafting, revising, and editing as products the teacher requires, as products they create after the paper is done in some cases—just to get the points the teacher would give for the "process." Instead, students need to be encouraged to think of the process as strategic. According to James Collins, "thinking strategically about writing means taking deliberate control over writing skills and

processes" (vii). Control is a key concept to being strategic, and it implies conscious knowledge and use of tools throughout the writing process and from one written product to another.

When I first begin to talk to my students about being strategic writers, I ask them what writing strategies they already have in place. Their responses show, first, an unclear idea of what writing strategies are and, second, a limited repertoire. "I work hard," writes one student, and I wonder if he could learn to work smarter with strategies. "Rhyming," writes another. As a strategy? "I write about what I'm interested in," writes a third. When I prompt them, I have some say they use spell-checkers or ask their parents or friends to read their papers. That is about the extent of what I can draw from them, even with prompting. I am sure that students probably have more strategies in place than this; however, since conscious application is key to control of the tools for writing effectively, not knowing what strategies they already have means they have little or no control over actually using such strategies successfully.

Levels of knowledge are an important aspect of being strategic, of gaining control over writing. Declarative knowledge is knowledge *about* something. Knowing the way my friends stood on their skateboards as they shot down the hill or knowing that sentences have subjects and predicates or that paragraphs usually focus on one central idea—these are declarative. Procedural knowledge is knowledge of *how to do* something. Knowing how to stand on the board myself and shift my weight, or knowing how to start a sentence with a capital letter and end with punctuation and how to summarize the ideas of a paragraph into a topic sentence are procedural. And conditional knowledge is knowledge about *when*: knowing when to shift my weight to avoid potholes or turn a corner, or knowing when to use a fragment for effect and when it's best not to do so or when to put the topic sentence at the beginning of a paragraph and when to put it later.

Strategic teachers know the difference among these three kinds of knowledge—and they know that to help students become strategic, they have to work at all levels. Hillocks's research (*Ways*) suggests that many teachers spend the most time at the declarative level, talking to students about topic sentences and what constitutes an effective thesis, for example. Even though almost all teachers evaluate students on the products they hand in as a result of procedural knowledge, few spend time at the procedural level letting students write and evaluate the effectiveness of different kinds of topic sentences and thesis statements, practicing until they develop a sense of these conventions (Hillocks,

Ways 28). And fewer still move into the conditional knowledge level of having students notice the effect of paragraphs that have implied topic sentences or thesis statements delayed until the middle or the end of an essay.

As Collins summarizes the types of knowledge, “declarative knowledge gives us information, procedural knowledge gives us strategies for using information to accomplish objectives, and conditional knowledge gives us deliberate intention and design in using strategies” (53). Moving students from declarative into procedural and conditional knowing provides them control as writers, and it is strategic. And it requires instruction and practice and reflection; as Nokes and Dole note, “because strategy use is often demanding, students are not likely to engage in a strategy unless they are convinced that it will help them succeed” (167). It’s my job as the teacher to convince them—and I can only do that by moving beyond declarative knowledge and into procedural and conditional knowledge.

Strategic instruction, then, cannot be about rules or about teachers talking to students or even about students writing on their own. It is much more about teachers’ thinking about students and their writing needs, about allowing time for students to learn and try strategies—ones teachers hope will be beneficial and ones students discover individually with teachers’ help—and about reflecting on those strategies either in talk or in writing. Good strategic teaching is more about possibilities and practice and thoughtfulness than it is about a list of activities or teacher talk.

Jim Burke, in his summary of effective literacy instruction, notes that “children do not develop composing strategies from red ink corrections (*nor from just writing*)” (199, *emphasis added*). We’ve all heard the first part of his statement; few have considered the second: Just doing something doesn’t automatically make us better at it, especially if we do whatever it is under duress or unwillingly or without concern for effectiveness, the way too many students approach writing. I just think of my own children when it’s their turn to do the dishes or when they are told to clean their rooms. Though they may have done both chores many times, simple repetition doesn’t always make them better at either of them. Repetition combined with instruction or direction or modeling or scaffolding can help, though. And that’s what teaching strategic writing should encourage—not just assigning writing but practicing it with strategies and then considering the effectiveness of those strategies. It means teaching writing rather than simply causing it.

To teach strategic writing, teachers need to think strategically. That means being reflective, considering what outcomes teachers want from each activity and how to make those outcomes meaningful in students' lives beyond the immediate assignment. In other words, *using* strategies isn't enough. Teachers have to think of them, and teach students to think of them, as strategies, as tools that can help them accomplish their goals as writers. Activities fill time, and they give us part of what we need to do to accomplish a task. These same activities can become strategies with a different perspective, with a new way of handling them.

So being strategic with regard to process doesn't necessarily mean stopping what we've done before. Instead, it means being more thoughtful about what we've done before and taking a different perspective on it. The processes that help us narrow or focus a topic or come up with a question we want to research—these must be considered as strategies, as tools. What does brainstorming really do for a writer? When might it be an effective tool? When might another tool be a better strategy to accomplish the writer's goals? These are questions both teachers and students need to ask themselves in order to become strategic about process.

The number of strategies has no bounds; it is limited only by what works. I know publishing writers who constantly find new strategies for new problems that arise in new writing situations. If they don't currently have a strategy to solve the writing problem facing them, they talk to other writers or think about the problem or play around with possible strategies until they find what helps them resolve the problem. That is being strategic. That is the perspective we need to teach our students. Certainly we need to teach them some strategies, some specific ways to solve challenges in writing, but we also need to teach them to become strategic themselves by looking for strategic solutions to writing problems and by being flexible in using different strategies to accomplish different writing goals.

Different Strategies

As I've considered my students and their needs, trying to develop ways to look at strategies consciously with them, I've thought that strategies exist for both process and product, both for accomplishing the writing task and for succeeding at the end product. At the same time, I don't believe that the categories are discrete; instead, they are a convenient categorization for talking about what writers do and can do to improve their writing. For the sake of this book and ease of discussion, I have

divided strategies into three areas that roughly correspond to the writing process: inquiry, drafting, and product.

Most writing uses a combination of these strategies. So when I am preparing to teach a writing assignment, I stop in my planning and make myself a list. What strategies can I have students practice for each stage of this assignment that will help them both to be successful with this assignment and to practice strategies for other writing? I consider what students need to know or know how to do with inquiry, drafting, and product to be successful—and then I consider strategies they can practice to address each of those needs. So, for example, with the Writing about a Person assignment I describe at the end of Chapter 6, I know that students will need to understand the model before doing research so that during research they will not waste time gathering information that wouldn't be useful. Because of this consideration, I planned a reading strategy with models. I also know that students will need to keep track of the information they find during research, so I planned a note-taking strategy for them to use. I work through each assignment this way, making a list of the specific needs and the strategies that will address them—and then I have my teaching plan of strategies.

Strategies for Inquiry

In Chapter 2, I make a longer case for the need for inquiry in teaching writing to students, but as an introduction to the idea here, I consider what George Hillocks notes about inquiry: “If thoughtful inquiry does not lie at the heart of writing, then our students become little more than amanuenses. They cannot be writers unless they are first thinkers” (*Teaching* 214). Inquiry strategies are those that help students find, focus, and develop ideas. They help students think about their topics. They include strategies that help students generate possible topics through brainstorming or remember ideas through freewriting. They might include strategies that help students narrow a topic, such as questioning, or ones that help them explore a topic, such as webbing. Certainly inquiry strategies should include all kinds of ways to come to know more, as I describe in Chapter 2. The Collage Write described in the application section of this chapter is one strategy I have students practice as a way to generate ideas through inquiry.

Strategies for Drafting

There is not one correct way to write. There is not one product that will receive an A in every writing situation a student will face in school or in life—although I have had a teacher tell me he tried that in college,

turning in the same paper over and over again. He was disappointed that it didn't get an A in subsequent uses. I was disappointed that he thought it would or could. His story suggests a mind-set, a belief in one right way to write and therefore in one right way to teach writing. A strategic perspective recognizes that texts respond to contexts, to audiences, to purposes.

Because, as Richard Larson notes and as many teachers can attest, "writers by and large do not know enough about how texts work" ("Revision" 99), student writers need to learn strategies for understanding how texts work and strategies that help them replicate aspects of texts in different contexts. Students need strategies for reading texts, contexts, audiences, and purposes. These strategies I call strategies for drafting, and they help students adapt as writers, a key aim of teaching writing. Strategies for drafting include all aspects of writing between inquiry and revision: planning, reading sample texts to get ideas for drafting, thinking, organizing—and putting ideas on paper.

In an attempt to get students thinking about their own drafting strategies, I pose a question to my preservice teachers about what they do when they face writing in a genre with which they are unfamiliar. One student, Julie, responded with this story: She'd had a summer job at a local business. The owner of the business asked her to write letters to overdue accounts to endeavor to get payment from them. She recalled that she thought about the task for a while, even attempting to write some letters. Finally, aware that her attempts might not be effective, she asked if the office had copies of such types of letters from the past. Someone found several. Julie read them, noting their features—the language, the tone, the structure—and then was able to successfully write her own letters. When I share Julie's story, I ask if others have had similar experiences. Many have. I explain that they have developed drafting strategies, an ability to understand from models how text types work in different contexts. They also have developed the ability to imitate what they discover through reading multiple texts.

Both the ability to discover textual characteristics and the ability to imitate them are drafting strategies. In a world that can ask our students to write more types of text than we could possibly teach them in school, they are better served by being taught adaptive strategies than by learning the few specific genres we have time to teach. To that end, then, we are more likely to achieve success if we engage students in writing that interests them, writing that they will participate in, and writing a variety of genres, so that they can practice inquiry, drafting, and product strategies that will give them more options. The practice

Annotating Texts in the application section of this chapter is one strategy for helping students learn to read a text like a writer, looking for what it does so they can imitate it if they need to. Chapters 3, 4, and 5 develop drafting strategies further.

Strategies for Product

Strategies for product help students revise and clean up writing to address concerns about audience. These strategies include understanding revision for global concerns by learning ways to re-see a text. They also include effective use of peer evaluations and understanding revision for local concerns, including editing texts in readiness for publication. These strategies help students understand the difference between revising and editing. Strategies for product can include anything that helps students develop sensitivity to text so that they can use the choices more experienced writers use to serve their own purposes as writers. Chapter 6 explains more strategies for product. In the application section of this chapter I describe an ongoing strategy practice, *Writer's Logs*, designed to help raise students' awareness of choices that they as writers can consider during revision.

Reflection

For writing-process activities to become strategic, students—like teachers—have to develop a habit of mind. They need to be pushed a little to think about what they do *as* strategies, to develop conditional knowledge. Mostly students are in the habit of just doing what the teacher says because he or she says it or because their grades will reflect it if they don't. Not only to make the strategies conscious but also to try to move them from procedural knowledge to conditional knowledge, I ask students to reflect.

As Carl Nagin notes in *Because Writing Matters*, “to develop as writers, students also need the opportunity to articulate their own awareness and understanding of their processes in learning to write. Research has shown the importance of such metacognitive thinking in becoming a better writer” (82). So moving strategies from declarative into procedural knowledge, moving from explaining to practicing, although valuable, isn't enough to help students improve in the long term. They also need to have conditional knowledge so that they self-regulate—control!—their own processes as they write. And reflection is the key difference in a strategic approach because it causes students to see

assignments as strategy practices, not ends in themselves, and the writing process as adaptive, not simply as a sequence of assignments completed and forgotten.

Kathleen Yancey makes the connection between competence and reflection when she recognizes reflection as “growth of consciousness” and cites Sharon Pianko: “The ability to reflect on what is being written seems to be the essence of the difference between able and not so able writers from their initial writing experience onward” (4). I want my students to become able writers, so reflection is a necessity. But this way of thinking has to be learned; students don’t do it without help and practice. As John Dewey notes: “While we cannot learn or be taught to think, we do have to learn how to think well, especially how to acquire the general habit of reflecting” (34). This is what I hope my repeated use of reflective questioning helps students develop. It’s a slow process, though, and sometimes it’s more successful than at other times.

Because I want my students to develop reflective habits—and because it isn’t easy for some students to do without repeated practice—they write reflections all through the class. Sometimes I have students reflect in a letter in their portfolios, using questions Kathleen Yancey suggests, about how they anticipate that I, as their teacher, will read their papers. What will I think works, and what I will wonder about? Do they agree with my anticipated reactions? What are they proud of? What follows is part of Saramarie’s letter in response to these prompts that accompanied her reversal paper (an assignment described in Chapter 4) on what it’s really like to jump off a moving train.

I really like this paper because it finally got my experience down on paper. I have been telling the story of my train jumping for a year now, and so it was fun to write it down. I am also pleased with the supporting material I included. I do worry that maybe my story is still a little bit too long. I tried to condense it in places, but it still takes a while to get to the action. It was also kind of fun to use some of the sentence constructions we learned in class.

I hope you will laugh at my paper and like it. You may think that I needed to present more of a common view, and have more of an introduction, but I have to say that I like it how it is.

Although these letters help students reflect on their processes and my reading, at other times when a writing assignment is turned in, I have students respond in class to shorter reflective questions unique to the writing we’ve just completed and the particular strategies we practiced. The questions are adaptations of the following general patterns:

1. What strategies did you use on this writing assignment that worked well for you? Consider strategies of inquiry, drafting, and product in your answer.
2. Why do you think they worked well? In other words, what did each strategy do for you that improved your ability to write or your writing?
3. Under what conditions might you use these strategies again?

In reflecting on an assignment that uses a collage as a strategy for developing an idea, described in the application section of this chapter, Larry responded to these questions this way: “The collage really absorbed me. Once I got out of that mindset, I was surprised to see what I thought about writing. The collage was also a great outline for the writing.” In reflecting on the same assignment, Sid wrote this: “It made it [writing] a little easier. I was able to think a little more about it since I had to find pictures describing how I felt. If I see a picture of what I’m feeling, I can better understand it and write about that subject easier than if I was just given a subject.” These reflections help the students consider how a strategy helps them so that they are more likely to use it when it is needed in the future.

At the end of each quarter, after students have written short reflections for all but their informal writing, I ask students for a longer reflective piece. I give a prompt like the following:

Reflective Writing for First Quarter

- Using a metaphor to develop an idea
 - Using art to generate ideas
 - Using drawing to clarify or organize ideas
 - Reading a product through says-does [described in Chapter 3] to get ideas for content or organization
 - Using questioning to develop ideas
 - Questioning purpose, tone, and audience in a model to get ideas for voice, content, or organization
 - Talking to develop an idea
 - Answering questions to develop an idea
 - Brainstorming to get an idea
 - Using the six traits [described in Chapter 3] to get ideas for inquiry, drafting, or product
 - Researching to develop content
-

- Imitating a model's voice and word choice
- Counting words in sentences to revise for sentence fluency
- Using sentence types to establish a tone
- Using peer reviewers to get ideas for revision
- Drafting in class
- Developing vocabulary skills
- Practicing sentence-level skills: combining, moving, adding

The list above contains many of the strategies we have practiced this quarter. You may be able to add some that I have not included or that you discovered on your own. (That would be wonderful!) As we have discussed, strategies are like tools. You need certain ones for different jobs—and you need to have some in your toolbox that you don't use often but that are helpful for those less frequent jobs you have to do.

For this reflective writing, consider which strategies you have found most helpful and why. Consider conditions under which you might use those strategies in future writing situations. Be thoughtful, clear, and thorough. I will evaluate this writing on the qualities just mentioned. You can use this paper to plan, to make marks or notes, for whatever you need. When you are finished, attach this paper to the back of your writing and hand it in.

With one class, a writing remediation course for students needing to make up credit or prepare to retake the state writing test, when I explained the expectations for this in-class writing, Larry, a student who had cooperated willingly all quarter with the shorter reflective pieces, snorted.

"What was that?" I asked, inquiring about the snort.

"This is just busy work," he replied.

I was shocked. We had written reflectively before this, and now I was getting this reaction? I didn't know where it came from, but I took a few minutes to remind him and the rest of the class that we needed to *think about* the strategies as well as use them in order to make them useful tools. The incident reminds me that it's not an easy task to push students to consider what they do, what works, and why. Still, there are more often some bright spots. Here is what Isac wrote, who at the beginning of the quarter had listed "rhyming" as his only strategy:

Using Art to Generate Ideas: This strategy helped because when I look at art or pictures in newspapers and magazines, it gets me

thinking why this person took the picture. What was the person or animal thinking in the picture? That is two papers right there. In the future I could see myself using this strategy a lot. I could use this strategy for any type of paper, I think. By looking at pictures, I can think a whole lot better because I ask myself questions and eventually I want some answers.

Using a Model to Develop Ideas. This strategy is my personal favorite. I think there is no better way to write a paper. If you read a paper before you start yours, not only does it have you thinking of topics that you want to write about but in the paper it shows you several different ways to construct that paper. I think in the future I will not write another paper unless I get to see a model of every paper I have to write.

At the end of another quarter with different strategies practiced, Larry (the snorter) wrote the following in his reflection:

Interviewing for topic ideas is a brilliant strategy. Interviewing people gives me as a writer a better understanding of my audience. . . . Asking potential readers what they think of ideas can redirect writing. As I found in my name write, asking those with a similar background (in this case, same name) changed my direction from factual to personal. Interviewing also helps determine reader's knowledge, and questions about the subject. This proved valuable in my brochure writing. Being a topic I enjoyed, I could've gone on any of a thousand tangents. Knowing what was wanted helped me direct my knowledge.

Reflection can work. If we work at it and have our students work through declarative and procedural aspects of strategies, the conditional aspect—reflection—can help them become strategic writers and gain control over their writing.

Applications

Strategy Practice: Collage Write

Declarative knowledge: We can expand ideas for writing through a variety of strategies, including metaphorical thinking.

Procedural knowledge: First write what you already know or think about the topic; then find pictures that connect to your idea. Finally, use the visual metaphors to expand your thinking in your writing.

Conditional knowledge: Under what other conditions could visual images create metaphors that might help me expand my thinking or take a new perspective? In what other writing situations would this help me? How might I use this strategy without creating the collage?

Early in my writing course, I ask students to write in response to this prompt: "To me, writing is . . ." They usually write for about three minutes at most and then stop. I want to introduce them to the concept of metaphor as a writing strategy, but they are stumped by the idea. They say writing is boring or hard. I press them to consider things that writing is like, but they don't produce much more writing. So I pull out my box of magazines and ask students to make a collage of pictures that represent what writing is to them. We spend some time in class on two separate days. When the collage is done, I give them an assignment: Using the collage, finish the statement "To me, writing is . . ." I ask them to develop the ideas from the collage, not simply list them, as a way to expand and explain their ideas. All of them can write now—and write for more than a page about what writing is to them. Here is part of what Jack wrote in response to the prompt after he'd completed the collage:

Writing to me is like the picture I chose of a football player carrying a football, because you can only go so far before you get stopped or make a touchdown. Writing is like carrying the ball and getting knocked down because when you are starting to write and you get writer's cramp or you just can't find the right word for how you're trying to explain something, it's frustrating, just like getting stuffed when you have the ball. Writing can also feel like making a touchdown. For example, when you have a good idea, you just keep on writing and going without stopping until you finish your story, or make the touchdown.

In the end-of-the-quarter reflection on strategies, eight weeks after the previous assignment, Jack wrote this:

Using art to generate ideas was a good strategy I learned this term because I am a visual learner. It helps me see the idea instead of just sitting there and thinking about it. It was really easy for me to generate ideas on the assignment we did on "What Writing is to Me." I found myself using that strategy on another assignment I had in my other English class. It works very well for me.

Metaphors are a way to help extend thinking, but students sometimes find them challenging to create. Given our visual culture, the use of images to stimulate metaphorical thinking can be a helpful strategy for generating ideas on many topics, and it makes use of Howard Gardner's theory of multiple intelligences. As Gardner notes, students "learn, remember, perform, and understand in different ways" (11).

Strategy Practice: Annotating Texts

Declarative knowledge: Texts function in unique ways that address their audiences, purposes, and contexts. We can identify the ways texts do that and consider them as options for our own writing.

Procedural knowledge: Use questioning and note taking to analyze how a text works. Choose and imitate aspects to meet your own writing needs.

Conditional knowledge: How might the questions we ask texts need to change to fit our needs or the various aspects of different texts? When would annotating a text be helpful to me as a writer?

In several occasional papers my class had written (an idea I borrowed from Bill Martin that helped my students think about writing as communicating with a peer audience), students raised issues related to current entertainment. Given their interest, I thought they might make good arguments about the effect of entertainment on society. I used this annotating strategy to help them discover options for drafting their arguments. After inquiry strategies—reading to develop lists of evidence and actively discussing ideas both pro and con—students are ready to begin planning a draft. First, though, I have students read a couple of short argument papers, which we discuss and annotate together. I pose questions such as the following:

1. Where is the author's position statement? Underline it. Write it in your own words in the margin.
2. Where are his or her reasons? Highlight them and number them. In the margin, make a note about what kind of evidence the writer uses to support each reason.
3. How does he or she arrange those reasons (if you can see a kind of logic to the arrangement)? Write a sentence or two at the bottom of the page about the rationale you think the writer uses to choose and arrange the reasons.
4. Where does the author consider alternative views or opposing perspectives? Put a star by these, and write a sentence about the effectiveness (or not!) of the placement.

When students begin drafting, they have a couple of models of arguments to use as guides to help them arrange their own ideas for an argument instead of relying on what I call the default strategy of a five-paragraph form. Most students prefer the options of models they have annotated—and they have learned a strategy for helping them examine other texts for options they can use during drafting. In fact, later in

the course, as students were beginning drafting in class (a practice I insist upon to get them started), Isac was just sitting for a long time. I approached him and asked him if there was a problem.

“Should I write this as a five-paragraph essay or what?” he asked. His problem wasn’t ideas but structure.

I replied that a five-paragraph essay was an option—what in class I had called a default strategy, one to use if you have no other viable options—but I reminded him that he might have some models in his folder that could also suggest possible organizational strategies to him. After a moment of thought, he asked, “The one about the golfer?”

“Sure, that’s one.” He dug around in his backpack (not in his folder where it should have been), pulled out a wrinkled handout annotated from class, and smoothed it out on his desk. After a few moments, he started to write. He had clear options now.

Strategy Practice: Writer’s Log

Declarative knowledge: We can build a sense of how to polish writing effectively by paying attention to what good writers do with language when they write.

Procedural knowledge: Pay attention to effective sentences and passages. Analyze what a writer does and what the effect is. Consider how you might use the construction in your own writing to meet your own needs as a writer.

Conditional knowledge: When I write, which one of the constructions that I’ve noticed might help me? How can I use the sense I am gaining of sentences to help me in my own writing? How has this log helped me as a writer?

The log is independent writing, which means students do it mostly outside of class. About every three weeks, they turn in fifteen entries from about ten pages of reading. When I introduce the log on the second day of class, most students laugh because it sounds like such a small amount of reading for an English class. Even after we do the first few logs in class, they still look at each other as though they’re getting away with something and I haven’t figured it out yet. After they’ve worked the first complete log, though, they don’t laugh anymore. When I reminded one class that they had thought the assignment length was funny, one student responded, “It isn’t the number of pages. It’s the thinking you have to do. It’s hard work.”

I give them the following model, and, as I mentioned, we practice in class to get started.

Writing logs: You should read about ten (10) pages every three weeks from any source or combination of sources you want that are appropriate to respond to in school. The log is not about content, so you shouldn't write about what the reading *says*. Instead, you should write about the writing itself.

Directions: For each page you read, make up to two entries in your log, each one noting something specific the writer has done, why it works (or doesn't), and when you might want to use (or avoid) the same technique. If you want to make a copy of the page of text instead of copying the sentence, you can do that and attach it to your log with the examples marked. (I'll show you an example of this in class.) Otherwise, a log entry should look like this:

Source: book, *Life the Movie*, by Neal Gabler, page 18

Passage: "Entertainment—movies, rock music, pulp novels, comic books, television, computer games—sinks its talons into us and pulls us in, holding us captive, taking us deeper into the work itself and deeper into ourselves, or at least into our own emotions and senses, before releasing us."

What works: I like the part inside the dashes, how Gabler takes a broad word, "entertainment," and then inside the dashes lists a whole bunch of forms of entertainment, showing specific examples of what he means. It lets me know as a reader exactly what he means by the term—and I like how it sounds like a real person talking, taking a little side trip in the middle of a sentence.

Using it: When I have a word that I might want people to know more about, I could put a list of examples inside dashes right after the word. I would just have to make sure they are all more specific examples.

Here is one log entry from Justine:

Source: "The Ball" article from *Sports Illustrated* (we read in class) [Smith]

Passage: "It looks like such a simple thing, the ball in the metal box."

What works: Holding back the subject that you're talking about calls attention to something before you say what it is.

Using it: I would use this when I am trying to get the audience's attention before I say what my main subject is.

By completing the log entries, students are building skills in reading texts from a different perspective: They are learning to think like writers. They are building independent product strategies.

Lesson Plan: Introducing Strategic Writing

Objective: Students will understand what it means to be strategic about writing.

1. Since the idea of being strategic in writing is usually a new one to my students, I introduce it first through shared experiences. Puzzles or games that ask students to find a way to complete a task more quickly or effectively are ways to provide this shared experience. One activity I use involves a square divided into thirty-six smaller squares (see Figure 1.1). I hand this out to students and ask them to count the total number of squares in the figure. After a few minutes, students say they have it figured out, and I ask them for that number. What they answer isn't as important as how they figure it.

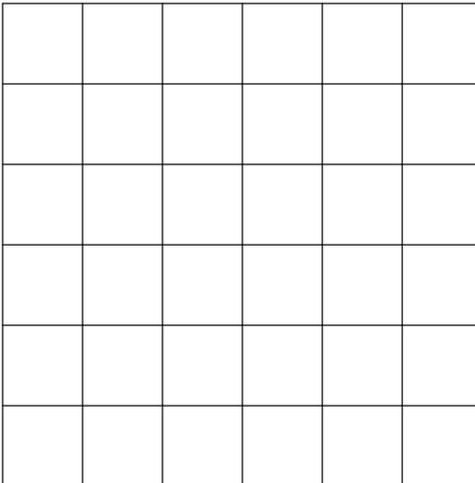


Figure 1.1

The first time I tried to count the squares, I drew around each square as I saw it. It took forever, and I still missed four. My husband used a different strategy and came up with a different number. We were both convinced we were right. Even if we had come up with the correct answer, though, my daughter had a better strategy, and her answer was both correct and fast. She simply counted the number of squares on each side of the figure and then squared that number and every number below it down to one. Thus, a square with six smaller squares on each side would add up to $36 + 25 + 16 + 9 + 4 + 1 = 91$ squares. The point, I tell students, is that I could (perhaps!) get the right answer any number of ways—the way I was figuring it or the way my husband figured it—but the way my daughter did it accomplished the task more accurately *and* quickly. I follow this activity with a discussion of tools: tools for building, for cooking, for gardening, for playing golf. We have a wide selection of tools to help us accomplish whatever task we need to accomplish. Strategies for writing are like tools to do other jobs. My daughter's strategy was a tool to help her accomplish her task more efficiently.

2. Next I ask students to consider ways they use strategies in their lives. They can give me many examples. The way they drive home is strategic because they consider traffic, stop signs, and other factors, including the shortest distance (although that isn't always the way they get home, because of other factors). They use strategies in all kinds of games and sports. They use strategies to get out of chores at home, to figure out the best way to get their math homework done in German class without the teacher's catching on, to figure the best way to convince their dad to let them take his car to the dance. Collins notes that even copying is a strategy many students use as a default (116). When they don't know how to do something one way or don't have the time or inclination to do it that way, they find another, one they think will give them success.

Some of my junior high students use a default strategy when they don't know how to conclude a piece of writing: They just write "The End." In much the same way, when I'm hanging a picture, if I can't find the hammer, I might use any weighty instrument (such as the bottom of a saucepan) to pound in the nail. These actions are strategies—not always effective ones, but strategies nonetheless. The point I try to get across to students is to consider themselves as strategy users already, so that they can make the connection with strategies for writing. And I want them to think of how using productive strategies rather than less effective ones matters, too.

3. After students understand the concept of a strategy, I apply the idea to writing. I use a short clip from the film *Finding Forrester* as one way to do this. In this scene, Jamal is typing in Forrester's apartment as Forrester poses a question about starting sentences with the word *and*. Jamal responds with a series of reasons, all beginning with *and*, describing the conditions under which it would be appropriate to begin a sentence with a conjunction—and when not to. To me, his response reflects strategic thinking as it applies to writing, and this is what I want students to see.

I use this clip to have students begin thinking about writing as strategic, about using aspects of writing to accomplish a goal and considering audience and context and how these affect a writer's choices when he or she writes. That is key: for students to begin to see strategies as tools and as options they have at their disposal. They don't have to use every one every time they write, but they should regard them as a tool box, a set of golf clubs, a whole palette of paint colors. Whatever the metaphor, students need to see that strategies in writing are a collection that they can draw from to use in different ways and in different situations.

4. It is at this point that I pose the question I discussed early in this chapter, asking students to write what strategies they already have available to them. As I mentioned earlier, some students are able to think of more strategies than others. I ask them what they do when they have to write something for a school assignment. Many write that they wait until they can't wait any longer and then just throw something on paper. I ask them if this is a successful strategy for them. As I can expect, most tell me it is not. "Why do you keep using it?" I ask. They tell me they don't know another way—or don't care to use options that are available, such as starting earlier. At this point, students are usually ready to consider the ways that learning and practicing strategies might be a benefit to them. For their reflection practice, I ask them to freewrite about what they see as the potential for using strategies to write. It is a good place to start, and just where I want them to be.

10/31: Sometimes I wonder if what I'm trying to do really matters to my students—are they becoming more strategic as writers? Or am I just doing the same things as all the teachers who've come before me? Today, it seemed as though maybe something is getting through. We were

reading a student sample of the reversal essay they are working on. As we read, Jack said, “That’s a good strategy.” I asked him what he was referring to. “This part, here. Where he asks two questions and then goes on to answer them. That’s a good strategy because it made me want to know the answer, too, so I kept reading. I’m going to try that.” Then he went back to his reading as though nothing momentous had happened. For me, though, it was a big deal. He was thinking about writing as strategy, about options writers use as strategies to create effects—and he was doing it when I wasn’t even asking him to do it!

On the other hand, Alec is still not doing anything. The other day, during in-class writing, he was drawing a cartoon figure. I asked him what he was working on. He said it was a strategy. I asked him how it helped him write more effectively, and he said it was his writing mascot. “See? I put it under the paper I’m writing on and it inspires me.” Sure. He was using the idea of strategy to avoid doing any writing! Using my own tool against me—and against himself, since he never wrote anything that day. What can I do to make a difference, to make more of a difference to these students who don’t write and who don’t want to write? How can I help them see strategies as ways to accomplish goals when they don’t even set writing goals?

Additional Resources

- Collins, James L. *Strategies for Struggling Writers*. New York: Guilford Press, 1998.
- Hillocks, George, Jr. *Teaching Writing as Reflective Practice*. New York: Teacher’s College Press, 1995.
- Nagin, Carl, and National Writing Project. *Because Writing Matters: Improving Student Writing in Our Schools*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2003.
- Nokes, Jeffery D., and Janice A. Dole. “Helping Adolescent Readers through Explicit Strategy Instruction.” *Adolescent Literacy Research and Practice*. Ed. Tamara L. Jetton and Janice A. Dole. New York: Guilford Press, 2004. 162–82.
- Yancey, Kathleen Blake. *Reflection in the Writing Classroom*. Logan: Utah State UP, 1998.
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As teachers, we've moved beyond simply teaching the mechanics of writing to teaching writing as a process. From prewriting to initial draft and through peer review and revision, we've mastered the art of teaching the writing process. How can we take this approach a step further to foster a learning environment in which we teach not only the process of writing but also the strategies of writing so that our students can develop the ability to write effectively throughout their lives?

In this engaging, practical book, Dean shares her insights as a classroom teacher as she explains how to help your high school students approach writing tasks strategically, both in the classroom and in their lives outside of school. Through a variety of classroom practices, assignments, and lesson plans, you'll discover innovative ways to teach writing, including sections on inquiry; on drafting with genre, audience, and purpose in mind; and on revising and refining the products of writing. Along the way, Dean shares writing from her own life as a teacher, as well as work by her students, showing the powerful, authentic writing that can result when we learn to think strategically.

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