

2 WHILE STUDENTS WRITE

There comes the time, after a rich set of experiences with ideas, after thinking, talking, dramatizing, and brainstorming, when student writers take their pens or keyboards and commit themselves to composing a first draft. When writers have prepared well, and when they are sufficiently experienced with the many dimensions of written English, their drafts should almost write themselves. Helping students to reach that point is the role of instruction in the writing stage, through activities such as those suggested in this section. Such activities can be undertaken in separate instructional sequences or they can be done as integral parts of specific writing projects.

Writing is a unitary process that is much more than the exercise of a series of previously learned, previously practiced subskills. Writing involves remembering, planning, choosing, ordering, spelling, and the physical act of writing, all at once. It requires the conversion of idea to language to graphic symbol, all simultaneously. Such a complex activity requires much more than a few minutes of instruction followed by a practice worksheet; writing ability develops slowly through much guided experience with the forms, resources, and restrictions of the language. Providing students with that experience and helping them through it becomes the essence of the English or language arts classroom. And it takes much patient effort, much diverse activity.

The writing stage needs to be viewed in two very different ways. Seen in one way, it is the flowing of words onto the page, easily, naturally, rapidly. But it is also a time of making decisions, of choosing what to tell and what to leave out, of thinking about who is speaking and who is listening, of determining what order, what structure, what word works best. In some ways these functions even seem contradictory; the first needs to be fluid and fast while the other calls for deliberation and reason.

The teaching task is to help the writer coordinate these two functions.

Fluency in Writing

At almost any stage of development, student writers benefit from fluency exercises, in which they experience the rapid flowing of idea onto paper, and discover that thought can easily be converted into written language. They need not be worried about error; they need not be constrained by form or convention.

Stream-of-thought writing. Students are asked to capture as completely as possible in writing the thoughts that go through their minds during a specific short time period. They use words, phrases, dashes to record the stream of ideas (or write the word "nothing" to record the blank times). The result is a record of thought—chaotic or orderly, simple or significant, diverse and interesting. Students write these records primarily for themselves. The record is both an exercise in fluency and a source for ideas which may be developed further at another time.

Timed freewriting. The teacher may ask students to spend a few minutes at the beginning of class writing as much as possible about any topic the individual students select. Response to these writings from the teacher or from fellow students would be appropriate, particularly in the form of queries or comments about content. The goal in timed writing is the maximum possible quantity; grammatical or mechanical accuracy are inappropriate issues.

Timed focused writing. Here the short time period for fluency writing is focused on a teacher-selected idea, epigram, issue, or picture. The teacher provides such stimuli as the following:

Questions: What do you like (dislike) about team sports?

Where would you go if you could go anywhere in the world?

Assertions: Homework is necessary to a good education.

Spring is the best time of the year.

Incongruities: Be a football during the Big Game. Which is bigger, birthdays or tooth-aches?

Topics: Skiing
Jazz

The idea is to write quickly for the short time period, getting down as many words as possible, expressing as many thoughts as the time allows.

Chain of association. Starting with a given term, students see where their first-thought associations take them.

HOT ----- → SUMMER-----→

SWIMMING -----→ SUNTAN-----→ . . .

Journal. Students are asked to keep track of what is going on in some aspect of their lives, both the events and their responses to them. The questions they are asked to track include:

What's happening?

What do you understand about what's happening?

What questions do you have?

How do you feel about what's happening?

What difference does this even make?

The journal has applicability to academic as well as personal parts of the students' lives. Examination of academic applications will follow in chapter 5.

The goal of fluency practice is the largest possible flow of sensible written language that can be produced easily by the writer. Keys to fluency writing are

1. starters that the student writers find easy to deal with;
2. de-emphasis on matters of convention and correctness;
3. some idea-oriented response to the fluency writing; and
4. much supportive reassurance that what they're writing is acceptable.

The teacher's role here is to set the task, to monitor the accomplishment of the writing, and to provide some content-level response, either personally or by involving someone else important in the students' lives.

Decision Making in Writing

Writers must make many choices as they commit words to paper. They need to appreciate the ranges of choice available to them in content, in rhetorical stance, in organizational pattern, and in linguistic structure. They need to understand how their choices will enhance or degrade the quality of the written piece and how their choices will affect the responses of their readers. The primary means of learning how to make the best decisions seems to be complex, continuing writing experiences closely examined by sensitive respondents.

Making Choices of Rhetorical Stance

Writers usually make assumptions about rhetorical stance when they write, whether they realize it or not. The typical school writer assumes the *voice* of the uncertain student, addresses the *audience* of teacher as critic and grade-giver, has the *purpose* of getting an A or B, and uses whatever *form* the teacher has proposed. Rhetorical stance becomes a valid arena for choice when the writer carefully and judiciously considers a *range* of possibilities in voice, audience, purpose, and form, and then makes decisions appropriate to the specific writing task at hand.

Voice. One might guess that the writer is a writer—and that's that. But each of us is called upon to fill many real roles, and we can project ourselves imaginatively into many others. That whole range of roles awaits the student writer in choosing a voice. Is he or she writing as a tenth grader in Ms. E's class (class clown? class dolt? class whiz?)? As brother or sister to an adoring younger sibling? As dutiful child? As new boyfriend or girlfriend? As star tennis player? As true friend? As sworn enemy? As the writer clearly establishes his or her own specific voice for any particular paper, he or she then can make the appropriate choices of content and language, of emphasis and tone.

Instructional methods to sensitize students to voice, to help them develop a sense of voice in their writing, follow:

1. Select a school issue on which there is divided opinion (progress reports, smoking areas, detention). Have students try two paragraphs on the same subject, one as the angry critic and one as the satisfied supporter. Then have students analyze the differences in word choice, metaphoric language, sentence length, etc.
2. Having selected some subject of adolescent concern (staying out too late, getting bad grades, getting a traffic ticket, cutting class), have students prepare internal dialogues between their fearful, self-critical voices and their reassuring, self-confident voices.
3. Having completed the reading of a literary piece, have the students write conversations between themselves and characters in the story about the events in the plot. They may assume a critical voice (e.g., with Walter Mitty) or a sympathetic voice (e.g., with Juliet).

Audience. Sensitivity to audience can make important differences in the way a written piece turns out. In considering their audiences, writers need to consider:

Who is the reader?

How sophisticated on this subject is the reader?

How ready is the reader to receive this "message"?

What help does the reader need?

What preformed opinions will this reader have?

The audience for any writing activity can be designated as part of the assignment or it can exist naturally in the writing situation; it can be simulated or real. Particular attention needs to be paid to *how* writers tune their messages to their audiences. Writers might articulate the audience clues in their pieces for their classmates as a way to illuminate audience as a variable.

Activities to develop a sense of audience include the following:

1. Select a well-known local event (sports event, accident, school activity, celebration). Have

students write two versions, one for a person who knows the general scene but missed this particular event (e.g., an absent classmate) and one for a person not at all familiar with either the setting or the event (e.g., a faraway relative). Contrast the two versions in class discussion.

2. Ask the students to assume they've received what they feel is a totally unfair second-semester grade in English. First, they are to write to Mr. Z, who is known to be intolerant of student opinions, very sure of himself, and very hard to talk to. The writer did not get along well in class with Mr. Z. Then have them assume Ms. Y was the teacher. Ms. Y has the reputation of being very fair and reasonable. She had been fun in class, and the writer had gotten on well with her. Students should compare the two versions, noting the audience clues.
3. Writers are to take a subject they know well (osmosis, internal combustion engines, classical music, making brownies) and explain some part of it very clearly in writing to an eight-year-old. Students should be cautioned about the use of overly technical terms.

Purpose. There are many possible purposes to writing—to inform, to soothe, to persuade, to upset, to confirm, to explain, to record, and to entertain, among others. The purpose selected becomes another controlling factor in the way a written piece will be developed. An informational piece would more likely select important facts and present them in a straightforward way, while a persuasive one might, deliberately or not, omit or distort some facts while embellishing others. Writers must experiment with purpose and the way it affects writing so they may make responsible choices of purpose and make those choices work in the writing stage.

Instructional activities which will give the writer experience with the variable of purpose include the following:

1. Select a local problem which is well known to the students (school, community, environmental, political). After discussing the issue thoroughly in class, ask students to write to two different purposes: one to *persuade* a re-

sponsible public official to take a particular course of action and the other to *entertain* a same-age friend who is away in a foreign land as an exchange student. Follow up with a small-group comparison-contrast analysis as a way to get at how different purposes changed the pieces.

2. Distribute copies of single-product advertisements. Ask the students to rewrite the information given there into an information piece for a consumer column in the local newspaper. Examine sample papers in a class discussion to see how a change in purpose changed the presentation.

Form. Decisions about voice, audience, and purpose, coupled with a clear sense of content, usually lead very plainly to a particular form. A concerned citizen wishing to persuade her Congressperson about a course of action on acid rain quite properly selects a business letter form. A young swain wishing to restate his strong feelings for his high school sweetheart would be more likely to choose a poetry form than a display ad. At any rate, a choice of form is necessary at the beginning of the writing stage.

Forms abound in our complicated culture; instruction in writing should include some passing experience with many of them and in-depth experience with some, experience enough to make them familiar to students and to make students comfortable with them. Sample activities for such purposes include the following:

1. Distribute copies of pieces done in a variety of public forms (possibilities include editorials, news articles, legal documents, myths, essays, how-to-do-it articles, magazine fiction, advice columns, children's stories, tall tales, and want ads). Ask each student to do a brief oral report on the piece he or she has received, commenting particularly on the form, how it works, and how it is appropriate to audience and purpose.
2. Distribute copies of letters to the editor. Have students try converting them into some other form used in a newspaper. After reading some aloud, discuss how well the alternate form works.

A list of some of our culture's writing forms follows.

Some Discourse Forms for Content Writing

Journals and diaries
(real or imaginary)

Biographical sketches

Anecdotes and stories:

from experience

as told by others

Thumbnail sketches:

of famous people

of places of content

ideas

of historical events

Guess who/what descriptions

Letters:

personal reactions

observations

public/informational

persuasive:

to the editor

to public officials

to imaginary people

from imaginary

places

Requests

Applications

Memos

Résumés and summaries

Poems

Plays

Stories, such as:

fantasy

adventure

science fiction

historical

Dialogues and conversations

Children's books

Telegrams

Editorials

Commentaries Responses and

rebuttals Newspaper "fillers"

Fact books or fact sheets

School newspaper stories

Stories or essays for local papers

Case studies:

school problems

local issues

national concerns

historical problems

scientific issues

Songs and ballads
 Demonstrations
 Poster displays
 Reviews:
 books (including textbooks)
 fiction or nonfiction films
 fiction or nonfiction television programs
 music
 Historical "you are there" scenes
 Science notes:
 observations
 science notebook
 reading reports
 lab reports
 Math:
 story problems
 solutions to problems
 record books
 notes and observations
 Responses to literature
 Proposals:
 Utopian
 practical
 Interviews:
 actual
 imaginary
 Directions:
 how-to

school or neighborhood guide
 survival manual
 Dictionaries and lexicons
 Technical reports
 Future options, notes on:
 careers, employment
 school and training
 military/public service
 Written debates
 Essays taking a stand on:
 school issues
 family problems
 state or national issues
 moral questions
 Books and booklets
 Informational monographs Scripts:
 radio
 TV
 dramatic
 film or slide-show
 Notes for improvised drama
 Cartoons and cartoon strips
 Puzzles and word searches
 Prophecy and predictions
 Photographs and captions
 Collages, montages, mobiles, and sculptures
 incorporating written language

Making Choices of Content

Strategic questioning. Once the student writers have built a full body of content by clustering, discussing, mapping, and so on, in the prewriting stage, they then must choose from this content as they set out to write. Here the application of a comprehensive classification of questions can help the writer highlight what is important and judge whether the prewriting activities have harvested a complete set of possibilities for the written piece.

For easy student use, we suggest a simple four-part classification of questions based on Benjamin Bloom's taxonomy of cognitive levels and Joy Guilford's *The Nature of Human Intelligence*. The question types are exemplified here with questions drawn from chapter 14, "The Happy Camp of the Freebooters," in *The Adventures of Tom Sawyer*.

1. *Restatement:* a question asking for a recall of the facts about the event, situation, place, or person being written about. For example: What superstitions existed in Mark Twain's time?
2. *Convergent question:* a question requiring the use of the facts to prove a point or support a generalization. For example: Was Tom Sawyer superstitious?
3. *Divergent question:* a question that causes the writer to use a known fact as a starting point from which to move away in a logical but unusual way. For example: What superstitions do I believe?
4. *Evaluative question:* a question that uses the information developed to reach some kind of judgment. For example: Are superstitions foolish?

For instance, a student might have chosen to write about a summer hiking experience in the Sierras in response to the classic (and often-maligned) topic, "My Summer Vacation." She would

have mapped the experience, developing details about the preparations, about each of the five days of the trip, and about coming home, suggesting a strongly chronological pattern of organization. If, however, she applied the strategic questions, as exemplified below, she might come up with some new insights for her paper:

1. *Restatement*: What special skills did this trip require?
2. *Convergent*: What did you discover about yourself on this trip that you hadn't known before?
3. *Divergent*: How is a place you visited on this trip like someplace else you've known?
4. *Evaluative*: What did you like best about this trip? What did you like least?

When our writer has worked through these questions, she will have discovered the possibilities in highlighting the special skills used, in writing about self-discovery, in comparing places, and in judging the quality of the experience, any one or two of which could add significant strength to a straight chronology.

Students will need much experience in developing and applying these kinds of questions. Class discussion could result in the students' building a common set of questions from a common assignment. Practice in phrasing these questions can also flow from almost any piece of literature studied. For example, after reading the playscript of *The Diary of Anne Frank* (New York: Random, 1956), students could work with the following:

1. *Restatement*: Convert act I, scene 4, back into the diary form from which the script came. (No fair peeking!)
2. *Convergent*: Use an interview format to develop a dialogue in which Mr. Frank is asked about the years in the Secret Annex.
3. *Divergent*: Write the diary entry for one more encounter between Anne and Mr. Dussel, keeping their characters and relationship as they were depicted in the play.
4. *Evaluative*: Assuming you had been a silent witness to the events of the play, write your own interior monologue in which you describe and judge Anne's treatment of her mother.

(Note that these have undergone an additional transformation from question to writing activity.)

Showing, not telling. The "Showing, Not Telling" concept, developed for writing project presentations by Rebekah Kaplan of the Bay Area Writing Project, asks students to select content so that the generalization flows naturally from carefully selected details. Student writers are infamous for their unsupported generalizations ("She has everything," or "That movie was stupid"); they don't naturally cite details and let their readers come to their own conclusions. So some experience in choosing the appropriate details can help writers to less didactic, more interesting written pieces.

The following activities are ways for students to become sensitive to choosing the appropriate details to support their generalizations (which then may not even be stated):

1. For a daily writing, ask students to turn a generalization into a detailed paragraph that makes the same point by its selection of fact. Sample generalizations:
The scene was peaceful.
The Demon is the scariest. ride at Marriott's.
She acted weird.
2. Teach specific ways of showing.
Do a characterization by setting alone.
Do a characterization by clothing alone.
Do a characterization by actions alone.
3. Ask students to detail comparisons and contrasts.
Saturday was different from Sunday.
Ninth grade is different from seventh grade.

Considering Organizational Patterns

Another decision student writers face as they move into the writing stage is how to order their material. Assuming the prewriting activities have suggested some sorting or grouping of detail, the writers then need to decide what to put first and what to leave to last. Various kinds of logic exist for ordering a written piece, and writers must match their materials to the appropriate logic. These logical orders include the following:

1. *Chronological*: arranged in time order, usually beginning to end. The flashback, however, allows the writer to begin near or at the end.

2. *Spatial*: arranged according to location in space. The order goes from near to far, right to left, top to bottom, inside out (or the opposite, or some variation).
3. *Order of importance*: arranged according to a judgment of significance, either from most to least important or vice versa.
4. *Logic of comparison*: arranged into groups of similarities and of differences.

And there are many other possibilities for order out there—the deliberate withholding of information in a suspense piece or a deliberate disordering, for example. A choice is a necessary early step.

Making Choices of Linguistic Structure

Whole dictionaries, thesauri, and series of textbooks deal with the lexical and grammatical resources of English. Since these resources are all available to writers as they move to committing their ideas to the page, here we will explore the issue only briefly, by illustrating some possible decision making in English sentence structure.

Sentence variety is recommended in many writing texts. Variety for variety's sake may have some merit, but it would make better rhetorical sense were sentence types to flow from some idea of how the sentences were to function, what information load they were designed to carry.

Let's explore a possible set of sentence types to see how form fits function:

1. *Simple*: The dog trotted down the street. (Straightforward conveyance of the fact of the performance of an action or a state of affairs.)
2. *Expanded simple*: The large brown dog trotted crazily down the crowded street. (Adds sensory detail to the basic statement.)
3. *Compound*: The dog trotted down the street, and the children followed him. (Combines two closely related assertions; shows the order of their occurrence.)
4. *Complex*: When the dogcatcher tried to stop him, the dog trotted down the street. (Relates two assertions so that one supports or amplifies the other.)
5. *Cumulative*: The dog trotted down the street, his legs carrying him crazily from side to side, the children following eagerly after him.

(Allows the cumulation of much detail to support and amplify a simple initial assertion.)

Names and grammatical definitions here are of much less importance than the ability to use these structures effectively. That ability needs to move to the intuitive level after students have had full experience with sentence types by manipulating sentence parts, by modeling well-crafted sentences, and by completing sentences from arbitrary starters. Descriptions of such activities follow:

Free sentence combining. Ask students to combine a group of kernel sentences into a single, well-formed sentence. For example:

Source sentences: Bottles lie on every stream bed. Cans lie on every stream bed. They glint among the pebbles. (From William Strong, *Sentence Combining: A Composing Book*, 2d ed. [New York: Random, 1983]).

Combinations: Bottles and cans lie on every stream bed, where they glint among the pebbles.

Glinting among the pebbles, bottles and cans lie on every stream bed.

Bottles and cans, which glint among the pebbles, lie on every stream bed.

Bottles and cans, which lie on every stream bed, glint among the pebbles.

Bottles and cans lie on every stream bed, glinting among the pebbles.

Students then evaluate the resulting combinations, and eliminate any that are incomplete, faulty, or lacking in clarity. Students then judge those qualifying as satisfactory solutions on the basis of clarity, economy, and expressiveness, identifying the most appropriate solution.

Sentence modeling. Ask students to write sentences on an announced subject, modeling them structurally after well-crafted sentences from literature.

Example: Write a sentence about a vivid sunset, modeled after "It blended

so perfectly with the sand, drift-wood, and seaweed that I might have passed it by."

William O. Douglas
The Pacific West

Possible solution: The alpenglow flared so brilliantly across the snowfields, the aspen grove, and the still surface of the lake that I might have thought it to be artificial.

Sentences from starters. Ask students to complete sentences from starters the teacher supplies. A subordinate conjunction will probably result in a complex sentence; a short simple sentence can lead to a cumulative one.

Example: When

Example: The baby cried,

All of the writing activities described in this section are designed to help the writer become more fluent and better able to exercise the judgments necessary to produce good writing. These activities serve as instruction in preparing the student writer to move from idea building and organizing in the prewriting stage to the production of a first draft in the writing stage. They can be viewed as the skill-building methodology for the writing stage.

The Writing Act Itself

The stereotypical view of the writer presents the poor soul hidden away in a lonely room, awaiting inspiration, then grinding out a draft with much frustration, much ripping of pages from the typewriter, much crossing out and starting again. This is not a useful vision of the student writer. Nor is it necessarily an accurate one.

If prewriting activities are successful, student writers will actually have plenty to write about, so the frustration of having nothing to say should be minimized. If they have developed some sense of confidence in their fluency in written English, they should find it fairly easy to put the first words on paper. If they have a sense of what rhetorical and linguistic choices they have and how any set of choices will influence a particular piece, they can move on confidently to what to say and how to say it. Student writers may finally be able to approach

a plateau of confidence, aware that they are undertaking a first cut, a starter, a place from which to begin on their revisions.

So, given a rich set of learning experiences with writing, it comes time to produce a first draft. What circumstances can best accommodate the writing act? Many teachers may make the writing itself a homework assignment, assuming that the instruction has already been accomplished, once the assignment is made, and that all that is left is for the individual to work alone to produce the draft.

Although such a decision may well be defensible, it is still important to compare the classroom and the home on two variables: the conditions for writing and the psychological (and technical) support for the writer. The classroom can offer a period of relatively quiet, uninterrupted time (if you work hard enough at it), linguistic references of dictionary, thesaurus, and handbook, and maybe in the near future even a computer terminal or keyboard. And the classroom, in the persons of the teacher and fellow students, can offer a cadre of sympathetic, positive readers who value writing and who understand the writing process.

Some homes can match these conditions, maybe even better than by the addition of immediate, one-to-one response to the writer's questions or frustrations. But in reality, most don't. At home there are just as apt to be the blaring TV, the impossibility of privacy or private time to do homework, a paucity of writing references and materials, and no one who has the time, the energy, or the experience to support the writer through the development of a draft and the subsequent efforts to revise and edit it.

If the writing of drafts is to be done at home, the teacher takes on a responsibility for educating families about necessary conditions for home writing, about how the writing process works, and about how a sympathetic adult can really be helpful and supportive to the student writer. Many families do want to help. However, if you discover that the families of your students either don't want or are unable to help, you may want to have the writing done in class, where you can create the conditions: a quiet, businesslike workplace; the necessary resources and tools; and positive, supportive interaction with peers and at least one adult.

The object of this first-draft stage, of course, is the production of a readable rough draft which

responds to the assignment with some fullness
and directness;
which gets written with a minimum of agony,
frustration, and wasted time;
which reflects some degree of judgment in
assuming a rhetorical stance
and asking and answering strategic
questions regarding content,
organization, and linguistic choices;

and which can be used
for response from a variety of readers,
for the writer's rethinking of his or her
paper,
for revision and rewriting, and,
only then, for a grade.