II. Communicating One’s Thinking

Teaching Ideas 21–25: Making the Transition from Writing-for-Thinking to Writing to Report One’s Thinking

Teaching Idea 21: Taking a Stand against Pretending and Oversimplifying

The first crucial matter that needs settling when thinkers turn their attention to their audiences is whether to speak honestly.

I believe that what is true of me in this regard goes for most of my colleagues: We prefer a paper that fails to answer a question definitively—but reflects real grappling with that question—over any paper which has merely “taken a stand,” rushing to judgment.

Take, for example, this excerpt from a paper in psychology:

The first real problem that this question confronts me with has to do with the term “cross-cultural studies.” It smacks so much of social anthropology that I begin to lose faith in my already precarious conception of psychology and what distinguishes it from other social and hard-core sciences. So I look to Brown and Herrnstein’s introductory text for some guidance and the first line reads, “We may as well have the scandal out at once and get it over with: ‘psychology’ cannot be defined.” The last puff of wind goes out of my sail.

A Harvard instructor gave the paper from which this excerpt is taken—a paper whose author more or less honestly attempts throughout to come to grips with a question, not pretending to know something she does not—the letter grade A.
Of course, honesty alone did not earn this student her A. She worked on the question assigned her, didn’t give it just one glance, throw up her hands, and declare that she was confused. Also, she took pains to express herself in a well-ordered and clear manner. Honesty of judgment and hard work—work on substance and work at writing—these in combination earned her an A. That is as it should be.

We as teachers can take various measures to counter the reductive tendencies that students display when transforming their thinking with an eye to readers:

- For one thing, we can correct their misperceptions of their current readers—us.
- We can also inform them of types of thesis statements they have never used, as in the handout shown in Figure 4.
- We can also give students practice in spotting thesis statements that do not do justice to the richness of the writer’s thinking on her subject. When a member of the class has produced a good, extensive train of thought, we can have students read it and formulate alternative thesis statements based on it, then choose among three or four such statements the one that best captures the nature and the fullness of the headway made in that train of thought.

If you prefer, in lieu of a train of thought by one of your students, you can use the set of thoughts and notes on alcoholism to be found on my Web site under “Organization Challenge” (discussed below). Those thoughts and notes purposely do not come with any adequate (i.e., faithful, comprehensive) statement of thesis, and deriving such a thesis from them makes challenging work. (Again, my Web site address is http://www.ncte.org/books/59133/resources/.)

- Additionally, we can help our students to enlarge their repertoires of organizational and syntactical forms, lest they avoid making true reports of their thinking just because doing so would (they fear) exceed their linguistic know-how. (See pages 55–56 and 69–71 below for specific teaching ideas.)
Must a Paper’s Thesis
Be the Statement of a Simple, Definite Position?

Usually, no.

Most teachers at the college level want students to practice intellectual honesty and rigor, not just to “pick a side and defend it.” They want students to discover the complexity inherent in difficult questions, and to deal with that complexity.

When the true end result of inquiry is a simple, definite position, that should be the thesis of one’s paper. When, however, the true end result is something short of that, one’s thesis should differ accordingly.

Fortunately, there are many ways to report one’s progress on a question clearly, interestingly, and coherently, even when that progress points to an answer which is complicated or uncertain. A few examples:

- If the question at hand is, “What caused the Civil War?” one might demonstrate that the question needs clarification. One might write, “If ‘cause’ here means essentially the same as ‘ignite,’ then perhaps the election of Abraham Lincoln can be said to have caused the Civil War. If, however, ‘to cause’ means ‘to help in any way to bring about,’ then . . .”
- Or, one might demonstrate that one possible answer should be eliminated. One might write, “It would then seem that, while we cannot say what did cause the Civil War, the issue of slavery did not cause it—at least, not by itself.”
- One might speculate, saying, “Have we, I wonder, taken sufficiently seriously the possibility that it was the North’s tone of moral superiority, as much as the Northern position, that inflamed the South? An examination of rhetoric, North and South, reveals . . .”
- One might even demonstrate one’s own confusion. One might write, “Historians identify no fewer than seven causes of the Civil War. Probably, each cause played its part, and so the question boils down to one of degree: Which of the causes mattered most? Unfortunately, though, determining a single cause’s relative importance is almost impossible where causes are as intertwined as in this case. For example . . .”

Figure 4: Handout on types of thesis statements
Teaching Idea 22: Organization Challenges

Many students know no pattern for shaping prose beyond the famous Five-Paragraph Theme, that model which assumes a single, simple proposition and a stock of facts that line up neatly in support of it. By contrast, few of the questions worth asking in this world yield reports of progress quite so tame—when the thinking has been honest and extensive, and the thinker reports his or her thinking honestly.

I tell my students how I feel about the Five-Paragraph Theme and assure them of my confidence that they are capable of more than that. Then, to start to demonstrate my confidence in them, I hand each one of them a set of thoughts and notes on a difficult question—each thought or note appearing on its own three-by-five index card—and challenge them to put themselves in the place of the hypothetical student who, having recorded those thoughts and notes, needs to arrange them in the best possible order for a paper.

Myself, I use the set of cards on alcoholism to be found on my Web site: http://www.ncte.org/books/59133/resources/. Several of these cards are shown in Figure 5.

Before students begin the activity, I issue the following warnings:

1. The hypothetical writer may or may not have written out an explicit thesis statement yet. If you don’t find one, you will need to formulate one that is faithful to the writer’s thinking before proceeding any further. (Blank index cards are provided for you to fill in missing parts of the paper.) Likewise with a conclusion.

   As always, beware of oversimplification.

2. Since the writer’s thoughts did not come to the writer in the same order in which they will need to be presented, there appear few or no transitional markers indicating how thoughts and notes relate to each other and to the writer’s thesis. Write directly onto cards to insert such markers where needed.

3. One or two cards in the set may not even be relevant to the question the writer is addressing. These, you should discard.
Figure 5: Five cards from an organization challenge
When my students have laid out their respective sets of the same cards, I invite two or three to say how they went about doing so, and then I give all of them some good, well-wrought alternative solutions to ponder. I rarely need to inject any judgments of my own in the discussion that ensues. Invariably, (a) some students are surprised that anything coherent can be made of the material, and (b) nearly all students—even those whose own ways of shaping the material would serve readers fairly well—duly note that there appear to be either comparably good or better prose designs available.

Teaching Idea 23: An Organization Checklist

One way to break the hold of the Five-Paragraph Theme—and so accommodate complexity—is to replace that much-too-simple model with a checklist. If the checklist is thoughtfully compiled, students using it will come to see that many diverse outlines qualify as sound. Here, for what it may be worth, is my checklist:

A Finished Piece of Expository Prose Normally Follows This Order:

_____ 1. or 2. Context

Does the reader need to know what gave rise to the question you plan to address, or why the question is important? If so, that belongs first or second.

Possible forms: broad statement, anecdote, both.

_____ 1. or 2. Focus

Have you stated your question or thesis? (Either suffices here.)

_____ 3. Body (your presentation of the facts and ideas that led you to your thesis)

■ Does the body take up most of the paper’s space? (Normally it would.)
Have you broken the body down into its logical parts? Will your reader be able to tell how each part differs from all other parts?

Have you put those parts into some logical sequence (temporal, spatial, least important to most important, least controversial to most controversial, etc.)?

Will your reader be able to see how each part relates to your thesis?

Have you left space to deal with possible objections to your thesis, either by concession or by refutation?

4. Conclusion

Do you end in a way that ties your paper together without being simply repetitive?

Possible forms: a thesis statement (if, for Focus above, you relied just on your question); a reformulation of your thesis; a new anecdote; a follow-up to or echo of the anecdote used above for context (making a frame around the paper); further implications of your thesis; further work needing to be done on your question.

This checklist appears also on my Web site, where it can be downloaded for copying: http://www.ncte.org/books/59133/resources/.

To introduce students to the use of a checklist, have them employ it as an aid in evaluating particular outlines or particular whole papers. (I myself would first let students issue their evaluations in any terminology that comes to them. Only then would I point them to the checklist and ask them whether in the checklist they find language for elaborating further.)

Teaching Idea 24: A Menu of Types of Organization

Another good way to break the hold of the Five-Paragraph Theme is to name and spell out multiple common forms of organization.
Five years ago, I enlisted undergraduate peer tutors at the Bentley College Writing Center to join me in determining and describing the organizational designs of hundreds of pieces of published expository prose and model student papers from around the country, in order to identify the organizational forms most widely used today. What emerged was a taxonomy somewhat different from those presented in handbooks I had read. We learned that the vast majority of shorter-than-book-length pieces could be categorized as using one of the following approaches:

- list
- setup/rejection
- comparison
- narrative
- hybrid (some combination of two or more of the above)

The booklet that resulted from this project, entitled *Blots*, appears in modified form on my Web site: http://www.ncte.org/books/59133/resources/.

Regardless what taxonomy you choose, you might reinforce your students’ understanding of it with a lighthearted challenge: Have them, on the spot, concoct several alternative outlines (each outline representing a different organizational form) in response to the immortal question *Why did the chicken cross the road?* You will not be disappointed.

A Not-So-Incidental Use of Knowledge of Organizational Forms: Improving Reading Comprehension

I never understood that literacy itself is bound up with organizational sense until, some twelve or thirteen years ago, I took some turns teaching Bentley College’s non-credit course in speed reading, which had for its text a book of reading selections edited by Allan Sack and Jack Yourman (1981).

While I believe that the taxonomy of organizational forms introduced above (and spelled out on my Web site)
will serve students better than the one of Sack and Yourman, Sack and Yourman’s central point holds true: The reader who has learned common patterns used in shaping prose will both get what she wants from prose faster than other readers will (since she knows where to look for it within a text) and comprehend writers’ whole arguments faster (since she knows how parts generally relate).

You and your students can test this claim in an exercise adapted from Sack and Yourman:

- When students appear to have mastered the several organizational forms you’ve presented to them, divide your class into two halves. To the students on your left, give five minutes’ time to read a certain article or chapter. To the students on your right, do the same—and with the same article or chapter—but stipulate that at least the first two minutes (of the five minutes total) be spent determining how that article or chapter is organized.

- At the end of five minutes, have your students put their texts away, and give the following brief, ungraded quiz:
  - With what question is this author dealing?
  - What gave rise to this question in the author’s mind? (Or, Why is this question important to the author?)
  - How does this author respond to the question?
  - What reasons and/or evidence does this author cite as basis for that response?
  - What, if any, concessions or exceptions does this author make?

- Go back over the questions in class, so that students can mark their own answers.

- Tally the results for each side of the class separately, and ask, “What do these results suggest for reading practice in the future?”
Teaching Idea 25: Putting It All Together

When I add a new element to my tennis game—say, “playing the net”—practicing that element itself, in isolation, is essential, but it’s not sufficient. Whether in tennis or in chess or in writing, time must be made for taking newly learned skills and integrating them with preexisting skills, until the new and old fit seamlessly into the same, larger, more complex activity. To help students integrate skills of thesis formulation and organization with skills of inquiry, I do as follows:

1. I conduct a new Think Tank (pages 15–24) and follow up that Think Tank with an Interview (pages 24–25)—with this one addition: As a student recounts his inquiry to me, I stand at the chalkboard and write his thoughts—as well as the facts that he cites—on the board. Then I do the same with one or two other students.

2. Of the two or three sets of thoughts and facts I put up on the board in this fashion, I select the one which seems richest to me and declare that set to be our basis as we move into the organizing phase of writing, so that all class members have the same material with which to work. I ask everyone (a) to compose a thesis statement true to the thinking reflected in that set and (b) to create the topic sentence outline for a whole paper true to that set.

3. I then call three students up to the board to write their sentence outlines there for all to see, and have them underline their thesis statements.

4. About each of these outlines in turn, I ask . . .

  ■ Does the thesis statement faithfully reflect the sort of headway represented by the set of thoughts and facts? (For one thing, does it avoid oversimplification?)
  ■ How well would this plan of organization serve the needs of a reader? (It might serve one type of reader well; another, poorly.)

5. Having gone through all three outlines this way, I ask how they might be classified by forms of organization (list, setup/rejection, comparison, narrative, hybrid, etc.), and I label them
accordingly. Then I ask whether any class member has produced a sentence outline belonging to a type not represented on the board yet.

6. If, in the end, certain significant organizational alternatives are left untouched in this process, I respectfully add them myself.

Three viable alternative outlines for a paper on William Carlos Williams’s poem “The Red Wheelbarrow”—all based on the same train of thought (see pages 16–17)—can be found on my Web site: http://www.ncte.org/books/59133/resources.

Teaching Ideas 26–28: Teaching Drafting

Teaching Idea 26: Banning Outlines, Dictionaries, and Grammar Handbooks

Perilous indeed is the moment when a student tells herself that she must now sit down and “write” her paper. If, by “write,” what she has in mind is just to “follow her outline,” merely adding two or three sentences for each point found there as she gets to it, the result is quite likely to be textual deadweight for the reader. Similarly, if she means to produce one essentially correct sentence after another—debugging every sentence for grammar, word choice, and spelling before setting her hand to the sentence that comes next—the result is quite likely to be flat.

Textual vitality depends partly on flow of expression, and flow, it may go without saying, is hard to achieve when a writer conceives writing as the filling in of blanks on her outline or as the meticulous creation of one flawless sentence after another. When writing flows, the writer dwells in what John Trimble (in his Writing with Style) calls “warm, imaginative touch” with her audience (1975, 19), exercising her good instincts for rhythm—and for saying next what it would be most helpful to a reader to be told next.

All too aware of the delicacy with which the post-outline moment needs to be approached by a writer, I . . .

■ urge students to think of writing as a form—albeit a crafted form—of human speech;
have them give their outlines one last look, and then have them put those outlines out of sight until they finish their initial drafts (a tack harder to take with fifteen-page papers than with three-to-five-page papers);

emphasize that first drafts are rough drafts, and banish dictionaries and grammar books for the duration;

and tell them of the practice (introduced to me through an essay by Linda Flower and John Hayes) of “satisficing” while drafting—the practice of quickly bracketing the words, phrases, and whole sentences that may need fixing or replacing later on, but refraining from that work (revision) for the time being, and moving on instead (1980, 41–42).

I attempt, in other words, to activate the oral (or discursive) instincts and to mute the fear of incorrectness. The attempt involves: (a) holding notes, plans, and outlines to the back of the mind, (b) placing dictionaries and other reference books well beyond reach, and (c) having problems merely noted in passing, rather than addressed as they arise.

Teaching Idea 27: Letter Writing Instead

Letters, it seems to me, occupy a curious niche on the continuum from speech to formal writing. To be sure, they are produced through fingers rather than through lips, but they pass between people familiar to each other and, therefore, they appropriate many of the features of real-time conversation.

In my experience, some students whose writing lacks fluency make strides in that regard when I invite them to think of the first draft of a paper as a letter to me. I suggest that they open with some line like, “Larry, you ask where all my reading and thinking on my topic has taken me thus far. Well, . . .” I implore them to “talk it to me” on the page. I assure them there will be time enough for lopping off their salutations and for fixing things up sometime later.

Other good openers include these writing prompts drawn from a longer compilation by my former colleague Sheila Reindl:

When I started this course/paper/project, the thing that really interested me was . . .
The questions I find myself thinking about these days are questions like . . .

One of the things that makes my question a tough one to reckon with is . . .

I want to know . . .

I have a hunch that . . .

I wish I could say in my paper that . . .

If things were as neat and tidy as I’d like them to be, . . .

I’m stuck. I’m stuck because I can’t figure out . . .

What stands out to me about all the stuff I’ve been reading is this idea that . . .

What I’ve been reading makes me wonder . . .

I’m learning that . . .

If you and your students are properly wired, you might have them correspond with you by e-mail.

**Teaching Idea 28: Freewriting**

Do you feel that in order for your students to attain greater flow in their expression in papers, they would need considerable, frequent practice outside the paper-writing process itself? Probably today’s best known regimen for boosting fluency—although it has purposes besides that—is the practice described by, among others, Peter Elbow: freewriting (*Writing Without Teachers* 1973, 3–9).

In its pure form, freewriting has but one rule: Write continuously—taking ne’er a break for thinking or revising—for ten whole minutes. Do not let that pen—or cursor—stop even if you find yourself saying, “I have nothing to say. I have nothing to say. I have nothing to say.” The faith on which freewriting rests (a faith borne out sufficiently often to warrant the continuation of the practice) is that the channels that connect the mind and the writing hand will soon be opened by this means.
A variant approach is to set students’ freewriting going with a stipulated opening phrase. For freewriting about the topics of course papers, the prompts of Sheila Reindl above do nicely. As less directive openers—nets for the “daily catch,” as it were—I submit the following lines and phrases:

As I sit here, . . .

Something which has been on my mind lately is . . .

Only _____ weeks left before semester’s end . . .

I’d rather be . . .

Don’t talk to me about . . .

What I admire is . . .

There are two sides to every story.

Some things don’t change.

Who would have guessed it!

Let your students freewrite in the first ten minutes of class time—or have them do it daily at home. Again, if you and your students are properly wired, you might have them do it via e-mail.

(To keep to a minimum the time and effort that you give to responding to your students’ freewriting, see page 98–99 below.)

Teaching Ideas 29–38: Teaching Revision

Teaching Idea 29: Encouraging/Requiring Revision

After they have learned that “making a mess” is a normal part of writing (a normal part of drafting, as well as a normal part of prewriting inquiry), students do need to learn that revision is a normal part of writing also! Many teachers . . .

■ require that students bring drafts of papers to class, to show that drafts exist by certain dates, or
■ let students rewrite graded papers, on the understanding that good revisions will bring changes of grade in their wake.
Myself, I do the former. In addition, though, near term’s end, I require that each student revise one paper he or she has had marked and returned by me—not just revise it for mechanics, but substantially revise it, for a separate grade. I also ask that each revised paper have appended to it a statement of the writer’s aims in revising.

Teaching Idea 30: Giving It a Rest

The first thing for a draft to do when it’s complete is to absent itself—to hide away in a drawer somewhere, and not to come out again until its author no longer has on the tip of his tongue the things he had intended to say in it. Only then is he reasonably well positioned to play the first-time reader of his words, spotting . . .

- phrases that would lack meaning to a reader,
- phrases that can mean more than one thing, and
- claims that a reader would find unconvincing.

To make this point, have your students turn their first rough drafts of one assigned paper directly in to you. Then just blithely sit on those drafts for a few days before returning them unmarked and giving your students ten or fifteen minutes in class to do the marking themselves. Would they have seen as much need for revision on the day they turned their drafts in?

Teaching Idea 31: Eye Exercises

When (ideally, after “giving it a rest”) students pick up a draft to revise it, some can spot its deficiencies in argument, some can spot the words in it that lend themselves to misreading, some can spot all of its grammatical mistakes, and so forth. Few, however, see every type of writing problem it contains.

I am here to say that many students’ eye for such things can be sharpened as follows:

Pull from your files five or six old student papers that are densely packed with problems of all sorts.

Retype the first page of each so that no marks by you appear on it.
Distribute to your students the first page of the first paper and challenge them to mark and label all the problems to be found there.

When they have made an end of marks and labels, give them copies of the same page with your exhaustive marks added.

The unmarked and marked versions of one sample student-written page are shown in Figures 6 and 7. Do you need more? An unmarked set of six—which includes the sample reproduced here—appears on my Web site: http://www.ncte.org/books/59133/resources/.

---

**Obedience to Authority**

Creon infuriated by Antigone’s betrayal for the burial of her brother Polynoeices, faces his niece to discuss her situation. Antigone is betraying Creon because she has to bury her brother even though Creon specifically forbids it. Through discussing Antigone’s father Oedipus, who killed his father and slept with his mother, Creon tries to anger Antigone. Antigone responded to this by saying she was leaving to bury her brother.

Creon tried to convince Antigone that a burial by a priestly abracadabra would not put her brother to rest. Antigone understands what Creon is saying, but she must put her brother’s body to rest, so her brother is no longer humiliated.

---

Figure 6: Unmarked beginning of a student essay

Lead a discussion addressing these questions:

- What marks of yours don’t all your students understand?
- Have any students “outdone” you, making marks that do not correspond to any of your marks? (Some of these, you may wish to _add_ to your marks. Even we teachers’ eyes can use sharpening.)
Point out to your students that some people “see” grammatical problems but do not “see” weaknesses of argument; others “see” disorganization but do not “see” vague or ambiguous word
choice. Then, assure your students (which is true for most of them) that they can markedly improve their “eyesight” in revision if—in repeating this exercise several times with different student-written texts—they self-consciously look harder for the types of problems that have eluded them (as individuals) initially.

■ Give them precisely that opportunity: Using the other first pages you have prepared, either conduct an additional four or five “eye exercises” in class, or let students do them on their own at home.

■ Finally, have students submit all of their marked pages, along with a note assessing how much progress they have made as diagnosticians.

Teaching Idea 32: The Mutual Aid Society

When students are at work revising a paper . . .

■ Have each student identify two revisions (other than mechanical corrections) he or she is contemplating making that may not yet go far enough toward solving the writing problem at hand.

■ Have each student prepare two “before-and-after” sets of materials—one set for each of the two revisions under consideration. In the case of a changed plan of organization, the set would consist of an outline of the paper as originally submitted and a new outline. In the case of revised text, the before-and-after set would consist of one or two paragraphs of the paper as originally submitted, and one or two paragraphs intended to replace those paragraphs.

■ Have each student make enough copies of his or her two before-and-after sets to provide all members of the class with a copy of each.

■ In class, have each student take a turn . . .
   ■ distributing the copies of one of her or his two sets,
   ■ explaining what she or he aimed for in making the revisions,
   ■ and eliciting response. (Is the new version actually better than the original? Does it go as far as it could toward achieving the writer’s aim?)

You, as instructor, should withhold your response until other class members have spoken.
Teaching Idea 33: Revision “Cells”

Once your students have grown sharper at spotting writing problems (by such means as the Eye Exercises discussed on pages 63–66) and savvier about revision strategies (through, for example, The Mutual Aid Society, directly above), they should be ready to start serving as writing consultants to each other without your leading them. By this point, they should be ready for revision “cells”—groups of between three and five students, all of whom take turns submitting drafts for comment by their fellow group members before submitting final drafts to you.

Mind you, the fact that you refrain from leading these cells yourself is not tantamount to your disappearance from the scene. Most all-student small groups encounter certain pitfalls; we teachers have roles to play accordingly.

- Certain group members dominate—but you can appoint one member to be official timer and charge that person with ensuring that each member of the cell gets equal time to share a draft and to preside over members’ critical discussion of that draft.
- Certain groups lose their way—but at least in the beginning you can have cells meet in class time, so that you can circulate among them, listening in and reorienting them as necessary.
- Some group members tend to rely too much on themselves; others, to rely too much on the group—but you can announce that your evaluation of each paper will, as it were, be an average of (a) the grade its writer would have gotten on the draft he or she submitted to the group and (b) the grade the writer would have gotten on the paper in its final form. Each student would thus have incentives to be serious about the work in both its phases: the solitary and the consultative.

Teaching Idea 34:
The Lighter Side of Imprecision

One should not aim at being possible to understand, but at being impossible to misunderstand.

—Quintilian

Once revision has begun, high on every good writer’s checklist is the matter of precision: Do the writer’s words bear only the
meaning he or she intends them to bear, or could they be misread? If I err pedagogically when I address the issue of precision, it is on the playful side I err:

I bring two neckties into class. I give one to a student who knows how to knot a necktie and one to a student who does not, and I have these students stand with their backs to each other. Then I ask the knowledgeable student both to knot his necktie and to give a running account out loud of what he is doing. I ask the other student to try to knot a necktie based on the first student’s description.

Before the actual knotting of neckties commences, I instruct all the bystanding students to make mental notes of the junctures, if any, at which communication breaks down. What specific utterances of the first student produce unfortunate results? Why?

Almost without exception, the necktie of the second student soon becomes a mangled object of amusement. I ask all present how we could have been brought to such a pass, eliciting as much as possible of the language used by the first student. Factors identified typically include:

- steps assumed and skipped,
- terms whose meanings in context are vague or ambiguous, and
- unclear pronoun references.

More important to me than the identification of such factors, however, is the more general point: The fact that a writer knows well what he means by his words can hardly be said to guarantee that his readers will. In fact, the mess made of a necktie in this exercise is but the visual representation of invisible messes produced all the time by inexpert (and expert) writers in the minds of their readers.

Also, I divide the class into two or three teams and have one member of each team leave the room. From a nondescript brown paper bag, I then pull a strange-looking object—an eggbeater, for example—and challenge each team to write the perfect, unambiguous set of instructions for drawing it.
That done, I call one designated “artist” at a time back into the room to render the unnamed mysterious object based on his or her teammates’ words.

In addition, I collect and distribute humorous instances of ambiguity like these:

**Classified Ads**
Auto Repair Service. Try us once, you’ll never go anywhere again.
Dog for sale. Eats anything and is fond of children.

**Headlines**
Juvenile Court to Try Shooting Defendant
Drunk Gets Nine Months in Violin Case
Milk Drinkers Turn to Powder

**Descriptions of Accidents (from Insurance Forms)**
I collided with a stationary truck coming the other way.
The guy was all over the road; I had to swerve a number of times before I hit him.

**John Kenneth Galbraith’s All-Purpose Letter of Recommendation**
I cannot recommend this person too highly.

**Yogi Berra**
When you come to a fork in the road, take it.

I report that writing with too careless a hand—“writing with mittens on,” my former colleague Henny Wenkart used to call it—often makes it hard for writers themselves to track their arguments.

**Teaching Idea 35:**
**Enlarging the Student’s Repertoire of Devices**

Ever since the 1970s, when widespread interest in transformational grammar started waning (leaving many articles and drill books in its wake), not enough attention has been paid to students’ generally poor supply of linguistic devices for showing the relationships among facts and ideas.
My informal study of English prose reveals twenty-two types of sentences, or phrases, by function: alternative, assumption, cause, comparison, concession, contingency . . . and sixteen others. Yet the collected writings of a typical student contain instances of only ten or twelve, and the means used to set them up—like the phrase “for example,” to signal exemplification—get used repeatedly, for want of ready options. Can it be that a certain student never has points to concede to the opposition? Can it be that another never needs to make assertions of a strictly contingent nature?

My reader may by now have glimpsed large implications here for any course aiming both at full thought and at adequate expression of full thought. Even the student who, through inquiry, discovers the complexity of her subject will, in the end, seem simple-minded if she confines her actual writing to a very few syntactical structures and phrasal cues. As Harvard University President Neil Rudenstine said in his letter of August 1995 to the Harvard Class of 1999: “Whatever your chosen field of study, you will not be able to proceed very far unless you constantly master new vocabularies, experiment with new forms of syntax, and try to see how precisely and sensitively your use of words can begin to reflect the very best movements of your mind and imagination operating at their peak.”

To help students fill their gaps in linguistic resources, I have created a chart of common syntactical and phrasal devices, listing each under the sentence/phrase type that that device most often indicates. Thus, under the heading “Cause,” I list:

- Because
- Thanks to
- In light of
- Since
- For
- Left-branching and right-branching explanatory phrases beginning with “-ed” or “-ing” verbals (e.g., “saddled with debt” or “not realizing her own strength”)

For the entire chart, see my Web site: http://www.ncte.org/books/59133/resources/.

I have tried calling my chart a “toolbox,” a “repertoire,” a “palette”—the labels I affix to it seem not to stick. Because of its size
and shape, it’s been called “The Placemat” from the start. No matter; so long as students make good use of the thing, I let them call it what they like.

Use of It
There will, I hope, be more ambitious uses of the Placemat to come (I have been trying one out for two or three years now), but its basic use is simple: With a highlighting marker of one color, each student marks all the devices that belong to his or her active repertoire already—i.e., all the devices which the student feels naturally “come” to him or her when needed. (Most students do quite well at this; I have randomly checked some self-assessments against actual papers by the self-assessors.) Then, giving special attention to devices under sentence/phrase types for which no devices have been highlighted, the student uses a marker of another color to highlight devices (limit of ten) that he or she would like to add to his or her active repertoire. The student keeps the marked Placemat out in view while revising papers, as a jog to memory.

Teaching Idea 36: Naming One’s Models of Style
By and large, students don’t wish to write prose which is formal and stuffy, but they do aspire to “maturity” of style. Ask them what in their view qualifies a style as mature, and you will (eventually) hear some or all of the following:

- It is more than simple sentences strung together. It demonstrates that the writer has the verbal wherewithal to handle complexity.
- It flows.
- It bears the stamp of personality—to the extent that the writing task at hand allows for that.

Having, through discussion, put into the air criteria like those above, give each student a sampling of diverse model excerpts from student papers, all of which pass muster for maturity of style, however much they also differ stylistically. Then, as a short, ungraded assignment, have each student (a) name the one, two, or three excerpts he feels most inclined to emulate and (b) try to deduce from
that selection (doing no more oversimplifying here than for any inquiry) what specific stylistic features would rank high among his own desiderata.

A Note to Myself
(Containing, it may be, one or two good leads for you, my reader)
When all is said and done, I still don’t do as much with style as I’d like to in my classes. I do nothing, for example, with prose rhythm. Also, I have yet to make good use of the ideas in two of my favorite books on writing: Herbert Spencer’s *Philosophy of Style* (1959) and Walker Gibson’s *Persona* (1969).

Teaching Idea 37: Ben Franklin’s Exercise
The student who seeks a stylistic breakthrough in her writing can be invited—either for extra credit or in lieu of another assignment—to do some rounds of the regimen that that old self-improver Ben Franklin once devised for himself. I have freely adapted a section of Franklin’s *Autobiography* (16–17) to come up with the following instructions for students:

**DAY 1**
Browse in the anthology of prose readings I have lent to you until you find a short passage—no more than 150 or 200 words in length—which you like quite a lot. Reduce that passage to a set of notes, using index cards.

- Every fact and every idea found in the passage should appear on a separate note card.
- Every note should be written in your own words, not the words of the published original.

Shuffle the note cards and put them away.
DAY 2

Look through your note cards.

*Write the best passage that you can, based on your notes.*

Only after you have written your own passage should you pull out the published original again and compare the two.

On a separate sheet of paper, write a brief appraisal of your passage as compared with the original. In what respects is the original a more effective piece of writing? In what respects is your passage more effective? What details of organization or style seem to account for these differences?

**Teaching Idea 38: The Secret of Life**

When students glimpse the vistas in writing skills development beyond “good work” and “competence,” curiosity begins to stir in them about the means available for traveling to such new destinations. To the extent that it is “life” they want—writing that has “life” to it—they begin to ask what life’s *ingredients* are: “How did Didion do that?” “How did Updike do that?”

I, for my part, play the shameless mountebank at such inviting times. I announce that I’ve identified the features present in all prose that is said to be lively, and proceed to unveil my findings as an equation:

**Weinstein’s Formula for “Life”**

\[ L = 3V + E - C \]

I, of course, let my students guess what all the terms of this equation represent, but for your information . . .

- the \( L \) stands for *life*;
- the \( 3V \) for *vividness, variety, and voice*;
- the \( E \) for *economy*;
- and the \( C \) for *clichés*.

In addition, however, I announce my discovery of a simpler, *alternative* equation:

\[ L = A \ldots \]
where $L$ stands for life again and $A$ stands for attitude. I explain that outcomes just as good or better than the ones achieved through the first equation can be achieved through the second—that is, simply through adopting a new frame of mind as a writer, a sense of oneself as “part entertainer.”

Apropos of this second equation, I like to read my students the following excerpts from a letter I received in 1977 from my brother Warren Weinstein, in response to the draft of an essay that I’d written. Students tend to appreciate these excerpts on several levels at once.

To be uncharmingly blunt, your essay just ain’t funny enough—or, which is really more to the point, it isn’t pleasing enough. I might also add, if you and God can ever forgive me for such an unfair generalization, that all your essays suffer somewhat from this shortcoming. . . . In this essay, for instance, I could only find one example of your when-you-want-to-be-buoyant style—and that in apologetic parentheses! . . . What are you apologizing for? Why are you so reticent to see the essay as a form of entertainment?

If I may be so presumptuous, I myself would like to suggest a possible answer to this rhetorical question: your damnable profession. You are in the business—a dirty business, but someone’s got to do it—of bringing college students down from their happy cloud castles of fluffy verbiage and billowing generalizations. It is your unromantic job to teach those hormone-ridden adolescents that the English language is a form of communication, rather than a mere effusion of sounds. To achieve this desired result, this replacing wind with earth, many ugly maneuvers are no doubt required on the part of the expository writing teacher—including perhaps that most desperate one of insisting that students write in plain English. But—and this is the point I want to make—even at those times when the teacher is forced to recommend such rhetorical abstinence, he should never try to fool his students (or himself) into thinking that such abstinence is anything more than a necessary and temporary evil.
Despite what Flesch and Strunk and Newman and most of the other modern grammarians preach, plain English is not the paradigm or summit of good prose. Rather, it is the base camp—that necessary level we must climb before we can gather our strength and enlarge our lungs for the trek above.

Feel free to quote my brother to your own students, if you like. Alternatively, I suspect that certain sections of Richard Lanham’s outrageous book *Style: An Anti-Textbook* (1974) would serve the purpose just as well.

In the end, let the pudding stand as proof. Give students a “good,” “competent” passage of student prose and challenge them to make it even better by “giving it life.” (Tell them not to be inhibited by ignorance. Where, for instance, vivid details are lacking, tell them to concoct some.) At least in the hands of certain students—those typically most willing to share the fruits of their labors afterwards—the greater vitality of the text will be unmistakable and memorable.

**Teaching Ideas 39–43:**
**Dealing with Grammar**

At least three arguments can be advanced against using class meeting time for instruction in grammar. First—as regards students whose grammar is poor—formal in-class instruction was, in all likelihood, the very pedagogical mode that failed to do the job in the first place.

Secondly, by the age at which our students come to us, they present numerous different grammar “profiles.” One student may never use apostrophes, never join two independent clauses appropriately, nor consistently put quotation marks on the right side of a period. The student in the very next seat may do all these things, but may repeatedly create awkward and confusing sentences through lack of parallel structure and misplacement of modifiers. Consequently, most of what efforts we might make in class to address Student A’s grammar problems would have no or little interest to Student B, and vice versa.
Finally, there is the alarm sounded both by David Bartholomae, in his essay “Inventing the University” (1985, 158–62), and by Richard H. Haswell, in his more empirical study “Error and Change in College Student Writing” (1988)—but perhaps put most eloquently by Mike Rose, in his Lives on the Boundary:

As writers move further away from familiar ways of expressing themselves, the strains on their cognitive and linguistic resources increase, and the number of mechanical and grammatical errors they make shoots up. Before we shake our heads at these errors, we should also consider the possibility that many such linguistic bungles are signs of growth, a stretching beyond what college freshmen can comfortably do with written language. In fact, we should welcome certain kinds of errors, make allowances for them in the curricula we develop, analyze rather than simply criticize them. Error marks the place where education begins. (1990, 188–89)

And yet we cannot stand by and do nothing for deficiencies in grammar. As I have told hundreds of students over the years, one pays dearly for piddling errors. Often their price is confusion. Even more often, however, the price a writer pays for being ungrammatical is not the loss of meaning, but the loss of ethos—the loss of readers’ good regard for the writer as a credible source. Whether or not, on the reader’s part, the writer’s errors actually result in confusion, each successive error will distract the reader, fleetingly turning the reader’s attention from the writer’s content to the fact that the writer has erred. After two or three such distractions, the reader will commence to take from them a (quite possibly undeserved) impression of the writer as a person who is careless generally, and so discount the value of the writer’s thought. “If the writer hasn’t tracked his tenses,” readers seem to say, “how can we assume that he has tracked his subject’s ins and outs?”
As Lisa Delpit (1995, 152–66) and others have argued, we can no more ignore this reality when teaching students who speak a nonstandard dialect of English than we can when teaching imperfect speakers of the King’s English.

Here, then, are specifications for a new curriculum in grammar for students in college or the last years of high school:

1. It should result in students’ mastery of more of the rules of grammar. However, . . .
2. It should not proceed as the traditional, straightforward (lecture-style) curriculum has done.
3. It should accommodate students’ diverse error “profiles.”
4. It should inhibit a writer neither in his or her creation of first drafts nor in his or her use of new syntactical forms.

I try to meet these “specs” in the following ways . . .

Teaching Idea 39: Grammar Self-Assessment

Various handbooks come with diagnostic instruments. Find one such instrument you like—or write one yourself—and have your students use it. The instrument that I use, which I designed with help from tutors at the Bentley College Writing Center, tests only for twelve of the most common types of grammatical errors. It appears on my Web site: http://www.ncte.org/books/59133/resources/.

Provide your students with the correct answers, and then have them juxtapose those answers with their own.

Field your students’ questions. (Be prepared to discuss gray areas—like the placement of a comma before the “and” that introduces the last item in a series, and the use of deliberate fragments from time to time.)

Finally, have each student transform his or her self-assessment results into a personalized checklist—not for use during the generative and rough-draft phases of writing, but for reference in the process of revision. My version:
The Twelve Most Frequent Errors in Grammar and Punctuation at Bentley College

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Error</th>
<th>Relevant Sections in Your Grammar Handbook</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>_____ Fragment</td>
<td>[In this column I refer my students to sections of their assigned handbook.]</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>_____ Comma Splice</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>_____ Comma Missing Between</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Independent Clauses</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>_____ Comma Missing After</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Introductory Clause or</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(in Some Cases) Phrase</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>_____ Misuse of Semicolon</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>or Colon</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>_____ Comma Missing to Set</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Off Interrupter</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>_____ Comma Missing with</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nonrestrictive Clause—</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>or Comma Inserted with</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Restrictive Clause</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>_____ Apostrophe Error</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>_____ Quotation Error</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>_____ Unparallel Structure</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>_____ Number Shift</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>_____ Misplaced Modifier</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Teaching Idea 40: “Giving Reason” to Error

As time and circumstance permit, try to help a student probe his confusion about a rule to get at his root misunderstanding.

Over the years, one young man’s teachers repeatedly told him to stop writing run-on sentences. Unfortunately, though, they never scrutinized a sample of his run-ons with him and respectfully asked him why he would not want to break it into two free-standing units.
One of his sentences went something like this: “Boston’s teams get close to winning championships but don’t ever make it the whole way, they choke in the end.” It’s a run-on because the clause “they choke in the end” contains its own subject (“they”) and its own predicate (“choke”) and so should be treated as a sentence in its own right (or joined to the first part of the sentence by some means other than a comma). Through questioning, however, it became clear that this student knew he should not join two complete thoughts in the same sentence that way. He had written the sentence that way because he didn’t consider “they choke in the end” a complete thought. If it appeared alone, he said, “no one would know who ‘they’ was.”

What this student needed, of course, wasn’t repetition of a rule he had already heard many times, but a chance to air his own understanding of the rule and to have it corrected (and to get his own intelligence acknowledged).

The phrase with which I name this teaching idea—“‘Giving Reason’ to Error”—comes from Eleanor Duckworth, who writes of a group of elementary school teachers who constantly “sought to understand the way in which what a child says or does could be construed to make sense.” As she puts it, “They sought to give him reason” (1987, 86–87).

Much of Mina Shaughnessy’s fine book, Errors and Expectations (1977), is devoted to the same cause.

**Teaching Idea 41: Speaking It Instead**

Occasionally, awkward constructions are the product of inordinate fears about writing, and about the rigor with which written, as opposed to spoken, language is judged. As a case in point, I offer these two utterances by a student who is a nonnative speaker of English.

**Spoken**

The employee felt guilty that maybe, if it wasn’t for him, his partner would not have been laid off.

**Written**

This person I talked He’s been with Wang for maybe 8 years. How he got hired was by someone who recommended him at Wang.
This young woman is typical of one subgroup of the student population—which includes many native speakers too—who have “good ears” for English but lack confidence and therefore trip themselves up on paper. With such a student, I read a problematic passage of his or her work out loud (or have the student do the reading out loud) and inquire, “Do your words sound right to you?”

Also, I explicitly urge such a student to think of her writing as “talking on paper.” (See pages 60–62 above.)

Teaching Idea 42: A Spelling Self-Assessment for the Age of Spell Checkers

In the age of spell-checking features on computers, most of the spelling errors that survive (and they possess a fitness to survive at which Darwin himself might marvel) are the homonyms, the words like “its” and “it’s,” “bear” and “bare,” which sound like other words but have different spellings and different meanings. One’s computer software fails to detect incorrectly spelled words when they are homonyms, because homonyms are, after all, words in their own right. What to do? Just as with grammar and punctuation above, find or devise a good diagnostic test, then have each student take it and use the results of it to make a checklist of the errors to which he or she is prone.

The spelling self-assessment I developed with writing center tutors has this much wit (and special pleasure) to it: Thanks, in particular, to two or three mischievous tutors, many of the sentences use content which would initially put a student in mind of the wrong answer—for example:

It [seems/seams] to me that Kelly’s jeans are in some serious need of stitching.

Teaching Idea 43: Proofreading Backward

Typically, by the time a writer proofreads the final draft of a paper, he or she is so familiar with it that each sentence calls to mind the next one. Consequently, writers often fly right past the very errors proofreading is supposed to detect: words missing; words repeated; errors in spelling and punctuation that flow from hitting wrong keys, rather than from ignorance; etc.

In class on the day a paper is due—but before your students actually submit it—have each student do one extra round of proofreading, this time from the paper’s end. That is, have each student proofread the last sentence first, the second-to-last sentence second, the third-to-last sentence third, and so forth, all the way backward to the paper’s opening. Proofreading this way defeats the high speed bred of one’s familiarity.

Shortly, those among your students who need to make this practice a regular part of their writing process will know who they are.

The Writer’s Internal Monologue

Cognitive psychotherapists like Aaron Beck have claimed that we of the species Homo sapiens lead relatively happy or unhappy lives depending on the “lines” we hand ourselves about them. Try that thesis out in class. Give your students a list of the things which other students have been known to tell themselves when writing and have them mark by those that sound like lines in their own monologues.

Self-addressed lines on the list that I have used in class include:

This could be interesting.
I’m not sure I understand the assignment.
I would like to write the “perfect paper” and to knock the socks off my teacher.
I need to remember to break down big projects into smaller, bite-sized pieces.
I can’t get myself going.
I would be afraid to turn in a paper that expressed my own thoughts on this topic. I’m not qualified to do that.\textsuperscript{5}

In notes to you or in discussion, have students comment: What, if any, lines get in their way in writing? Where do these lines come from? Can such lines be stricken from one’s script or changed?

Notes

1. Some, in fact, would go even further than this and claim that more than expression is involved: they believe that, without means for expressing complex thoughts, people are less likely to have those complex thoughts in the first place. “Thought,” according to Vygotsky, “is born through words” (1962, 153).

2. The term “left-branching”—abbreviated LB on the full chart that is available on my Web site—refers to syntactical devices available for use in a sentence before the main clause. (The classic periodic sentences of Cicero lean heavy to the left.) The term “right-branching”—abbreviated RB on the chart—refers to syntactical devices used after the main clause. (Francis Christensen’s “generative sentences”—like Faulkner’s line, “She came among them behind the man, gaunt in the gray shapeless garment and the sunbonnet, wearing stained canvas gymnasium shoes”—lean heavy to the right.) Students unaware of all the options left and right will be able neither to pack as much into a single, graceful sentence, nor to manipulate emphasis as well as students with that knowledge can.

3. Aristotle’s term, from The Rhetoric.

4. I advise my students to mark any type of error which they made two or more times on the self-assessment instrument.

5. For my whole compilation, please see my Web site: http://www.ncte.org/books/59133/resources/.