

# STRATEGIC WRITING

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# Strategic Writing

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

Second Edition

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# Preface to the Second Edition

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When NCTE Senior Editor Bonny Graham told me that I should write a preface explaining the revisions for this second edition, I realized that I had never written one of these before. I have written introductions and acknowledgments, but neither is a preface, exactly. And I'd never even thought about a preface that explains the purpose of a second edition of a book. I have strategies, though, to help me know how to write something new. That's what I've always wished for my students: that they have strategies to give them the confidence they will need to face all the different genres they will write in their lives—perhaps some we don't even know yet.

The first edition of *Strategic Writing: The Writing Process and Beyond in the Secondary English Classroom* was the story of my teaching journey, of trying to find a way to help my students become the kind of writers who have strategies and know how to use them in various situations. It was my path through trial and error in teaching junior high and high school students, seeking a way to best help them be writers for life, not just for school assignments. That was the story behind the first edition.

This revised edition is partly my continuing story, my continued journey to help student writers, and partly the story of teachers' responses to my story: what worked for them and what didn't. I'm grateful for those teachers' insights and feedback—so helpful and humbling. Their comments helped me refine my own understandings, look at my practices through others' eyes, and seek ways to improve the strategic approach to writing instruction. This revised edition is also a response to a changing climate in writing instruction: tests and standards and an emphasis on certain kinds of writing. And it's a response to the changing world of writing: the digital world is so much more present than it was more than a decade ago. New genres have emerged along with new tools for writing.

Rewriting the book has been both labor and love. When I showed an early revision to a trusted colleague, his response led to a mostly new book. I had to rethink what I was about: tone and content, voice and stance. I reenvisioned the book instead of just adding to or subtracting from it (which was kind of my original idea). That reenvisioning, starting from a blank screen, was some

of the labor. After I had the rough revision—and close to my deadline—I spent some time alone, writing in a hotel room away from what was familiar and possibly distracting. I will always remember the view from my hotel room—a harbor view in Portland, Maine; I spent some of my writing time looking out that window, thinking about the work I was doing, remembering the faces and needs of my students and the teachers I had worked with. Remembering the people involved in this work was the love part. During that intense revision time, I allowed myself to leave my room for breakfast and dinner only—lunch was pretzels and Diet Coke while I wrote so that I wouldn't be distracted. I don't address self-regulation strategies directly in this book, but I used them a lot in my own writing of it, along with many of the strategies I do write about in the book. The use of those strategies during my own writing reinforced the concepts of this book for me.

Since the first edition, the public conversation about standards and testing has pushed writing instruction into the limelight; teachers, along with a lot of other people, are thinking more about writing instruction. Almost weekly I see articles in public, not just academic, venues about how we should teach writing to achieve what we want. That attention can be good. It encourages us to pay more attention to writing instruction and what it means to develop lifelong writers. But these same influences have also pushed teachers into stressful positions. Tests and standards have put pressure on schools and administrators, pressure that gets passed along to teachers. What do we do to teach writing effectively in this climate? I hope this revised edition helps to answer that question.

So, what is different in this edition? A lot. Most of the changes were made in an effort to help teachers better understand an overall strategic approach that can counter the testing climate that pervades many schools, a strategic approach that works within a workshop model and uses the writing process as an umbrella framework.

Here are some of the major changes:

- *Explicit strategy talk*: Teachers told me they wanted a more explicit explanation of what counts as strategy and what it looks like to teach from a strategic approach. In this edition, I am much more explicit about what strategies are and how we can teach them through an overall strategic approach. In addition to putting strategies front and center, the lesson plans differentiate between strategy, activity, and mini-lesson to further show how strategies function in an overall approach.
- *Digital tools and genres*: We use digital tools more widely now than we did a decade ago, and, as writers, we are adapting those digital tools to the strategies we use when we write. We also write in digital genres that are constant-

ly evolving. In this edition, I explain how writers can use digital strategies more effectively and share some of the digital genres my students and I have explored through a strategic approach.

- *Accessibility*: This edition is organized so that the conceptual material is accessible in early, shorter chapters. Although these chapters include examples from my own and other teachers' classrooms, they are more focused on the *what* and the *why*. I placed the *how*—teaching ideas, examples of student work, and lesson plans—in the appendixes to make it easier for you to access the things you need.
- *Grouping by types of strategies*: One way to understand a strategic approach is to group the strategies to align more with process than with rhetoric. So this revised edition has reorganized ideas to do that. For example, the chapters on audience and purpose from the first edition are combined in this edition because so many of the strategies that help writers address these rhetorical concepts overlap. On the other hand, the revision chapter is divided into two chapters, global and local, as the strategies for these different levels of revision can be quite different.

This edition still highlights student work and provides detailed lesson plans I developed in response to a strategic writing approach. It also contains numerous examples of what I call strategy practices, shorter pieces of writing that allow students to practice writing strategies in the context of writing. This edition still tries to balance my philosophy that we work in a school setting (and thus have to teach some school genres) but that we want to prepare students for writing outside of school (and thus need to have students explore genres that exist outside of school).

Nelson Mandela said, “May your choices reflect your hopes, not your fears.” In this second edition of *Strategic Writing*, I believe that speaks to the changes I’ve made, that they are about my hopes for my students as writers, my hopes for myself as their teacher, and my hopes for readers of this book as they continue their own journeys as writing teachers.



# Acknowledgments

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In a DVD titled *Everyday Creativity*, Dewitt Jones explains how many rolls of film—more than 400—are typically used to gather the 30 or so images used in a *National Geographic* article. Thousands more than are needed. The excess allows photographers to try out angles, to take risks. Writing—and teaching—involves taking risks too. But we often don't have the luxury of hundreds of tries. I am blessed that NCTE was willing to give me another go at this book, a chance to improve what I had tried to say in the first edition. I want to thank them—especially Bonny Graham's close reading and attention to detail—for this opportunity to try again. Bonny's help was invaluable.

Students—too many to name—and teachers have helped me write this revision. Special thanks to Sarah Johnson Plant and Joseph Wiederhold, teachers who embraced a strategic approach whole-heartedly and taught me from their examples how to share the ideas more effectively. Their questions deepened my thinking—and that's always a good thing. In the middle of the revision process, my Central Utah Writing Project codirectors and I modeled how a writing group works for our new summer fellows. I gave them my first chapter, revised, as my piece for the modeling. And I'm glad I did. Their insightful comments and questions not only show the benefit of peer feedback, but they also helped me reenvision my revision. So, thank you to Chris Crowe, Chris Thompson, and Joseph Wiederhold (again).

And always, for patience and encouragement, for foot rubs and dinner, and so much more: David.



# Introduction: Where I've/We've Been and Where I'm/We're Going

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Someone asked me about writing this book.

“What’s it about?”

“Teaching writing.”

“Oh.” Then nothing. I could tell what he was thinking: *That sounds boring. Why can’t you write something people will want to read—like a murder mystery or something?* After a long pause, he asked, “So, how will it be different from what’s out there?”

Good question.

My idea of being a teacher of writing has changed (I hope in positive ways) since I began teaching. I’ve had so many ideas that didn’t work the way I thought they would, ideas that others described in conferences or in publications that sounded so effective but didn’t accomplish what I wanted to accomplish or didn’t work the way I thought they would.

I have sometimes felt like a mountain climber, finding handholds and footholds from time to time, slipping a little, climbing little by little. I’m not at the top of the mountain yet—still finding footholds—but I’ve found some vistas, some places to rest and consider before I climb again. During these reflective times, I’ve decided on certain principles that guide the climb for the next phase. These are the principles behind the teaching practices that led to this book, what makes it different, I guess.

Overall, I want to use the writing process as a set of tools instead of the track my course runs on, a way of thinking about what writers do instead of a series of activities students associate with school writing, a way of thinking that might make school writing valuable to all the writing students might do in a lifetime. But that’s what I think all teachers of writing want. How is this book (my climb) different?

First, it uses process as a strategy more than as a course structure. I acknowledge that not all writing requires the complete writing process—certainly some school writing is that kind. Personal journal entries or text messages don’t nec-

essarily require revision or prewriting. Some writing is meant to show student learning—that students have done the reading or know the facts we expect them to know. Does that writing require the entire process? Because of the way I use the writing process in my classroom, my students should begin to see that elements of the process are actually strategies for improving thinking, expression, and communication, not just requirements for completion of a project. The writing process contains a set of strategies that writers should use thoughtfully to meet their writing goals.

I know that many students see the writing process as something they do for English class; they don't see it as useful to them as writers across all disciplines or in everyday life. Even preservice teachers tell me they don't see the value; many of them report that they "roughed up" drafts just to meet the requirement of multiple drafts, although some admitted to turning in two copies of the same paper and simply labeling one a "rough draft." Since they received credit—and most of them made good grades—the idea of process was not strategic. It was busywork. So, besides using the process as a strategy, I also *talk about* process as strategy so that my students will see what we do as more than a sequence of "activities."

When teachers implement the writing process in classrooms, students often do more prewriting than they did with earlier writing curricula, and that prewriting comes in many forms: freewriting, webs, cubing, clustering, heuristics. Many times, however, prewriting simply turns into a method of selecting or focusing on a topic. Less often is prewriting used as a way to come to know, to encourage curiosity, to learn to question, or to explore thinking from reading. Often the prewriting strategy doesn't really do what writers need it to do for them; it's just the one the teacher requires. My use of process as a strategy encourages a thoughtful consideration and conscious use of prewriting techniques as strategic tools that encourage inquiry as well as topic selection and focus.

Considering process as strategy, I use writing more frequently to promote learning, not just to show learning. Students need to question, to explore, and to develop thinking through a number of avenues prior to producing polished written texts that will be evaluated for their thinking and writing.

Because I consider the writing process as strategy, my approach is also different in that the assignments are a means to an end, not simply ends in themselves. They are ways to practice strategies, to consider processes and differences in products and how different products require different processes to create them. Although I expect students to produce quality products with substantive thinking, the emphasis is on the use of strategies and how being strategic can improve our writing processes as well as our written products. The focus is on transfer—

making sure students consider how their individual use of strategies might be useful to them when they write in the future and outside of class.

Because I want students to practice strategies, the writing tasks we engage in need to be interesting and unusual. Students won't get the practice they need with process strategies if they don't write—and many of the students I've taught have been so unsuccessful with more traditional writing assignments that I lose them even before I begin. I tend to ask students to write genres they see in the world around them more often than the ones they usually write in English classes. Because I take a strategic approach, though, students are able to transfer the strategies they practice in writing in response to interesting (they say "different") writing genres to other, more traditional, writing. I know this because I eventually assign a few more traditional assignments and have students apply the strategies to those, just to make sure. To begin, however, I try to make sure the writing we do is interesting and different; that's part of the rationale behind some of the more unusual strategy practice ideas I describe in this book.

Additionally, I want assignments to encourage students to write in a variety of genres for a variety of situations, to become sensitive to context as part of the thinking related to a specific writing task. Many times this means making more explicit the connections between reading and writing as students see how texts they read respond to considerations of purpose, audience, and genre—and that's an important part of this book. These connections should help students consider rhetorical choices authors make and how student writers might make similar choices when they compose. That's strategic.

And considering writers' choices requires more class talk, so sometimes classes aren't as quiet as writing classes might normally be. (Many students learn that talking is an effective strategy for them at all stages of the writing process.) Exploring the way writing fits into and impacts social situations requires discussion, negotiation, and collaboration. To develop sensitivity to the ways texts work in different contexts and to consider their own procedures and processes, students need to explore others' responses to their thinking and writing. And that involves talk.

Since classrooms can't address all the possible writing genres and contexts students will encounter, I want an approach to classroom practice that will create strategic writers who can adapt their writing to a variety of needs and situations. This does not mean I simply get a list of strategies from the back of a book like a vocabulary list and go through them in lessons one by one. To become strategic writers, students need each writing task to be a workshop, a way to practice strategies. As teachers, we can think of which strategies might be most appropriate for each writing task and then encourage students to think consciously of those strategies and of other circumstances in which those strategies

could be effective. This reflection, one that encourages transfer, helps students become writers who make writerly choices, not just in classroom writing but in writing beyond the school walls.

All of this leads to the last major difference of this book—that I try to make conscious use of all levels of knowledge: declarative, procedural, and conditional. The declarative explains and directs, while the procedural gives students practice with the strategies. The conditional helps students reflect on their use of strategies, come to know themselves better as writers, and consider how they might extend their strategy use beyond the particular writing task.

Although I provide some ideas for practicing strategies and implementing levels of knowledge, this book is really just a starting place. It's not meant to spell out everything a teacher should or could do to help students become strategic writers. I hope it works in the same way as the strategy practices I describe do for students: I hope it gives us a way to work through declarative, procedural, and conditional knowledge about teaching writing so that you can translate the ideas into the practices that work for the individual students and the needs you face in your own classroom. I hope this book invites you to engage your students in writing that is interesting and challenging. I hope, finally, that by beginning with this text and its ideas—and extending them in response to individual classroom needs—you can build a writing curriculum that develops strategic writers, ones who have developed tools that allow them to respond effectively to a wider variety of writing situations than we can possibly address in school—a world of writing.



P.S. A few things about reading and using this book. First, about the writing process as I use it: The chapters describe process as inquiry, drafting, and revision. This is a broad generalization about the writing process that is necessary for organizing a book about it. In reality, as described in Chapter 2, the aspects of process overlap.

Each chapter begins with a personal story related to the idea of the chapter because writing (and teaching!) is personal and because stories are a powerful way to make connections to concepts. I try to make those connections for my students with my own stories and encourage you to do the same. If we talk about ourselves as writers, tell our own writing stories, I hope our students will too. And telling their own stories about writing will, I believe, develop in them a sense that they are writers. The chapters then give an overview of the concept of the chapter and some specific ways those concepts can be implemented.

Each chapter concludes with my reflection and resources readers might use for more information on the ideas discussed in the chapter. It's my wish that

not only will we help students practice habits of reflection as writers in order to develop conditional knowledge, but also that as teachers we will be more reflective about our teaching practices. My reflections, I hope, will spark that in readers. The sources will give readers the opportunity to act on issues raised in those reflections.

The appendixes contain concrete examples: strategy practices outlined in detail, full writing lessons that reflect the way I integrate the principles explained in the chapters, and student writing in response to the ideas I share. The chapters are meant as starting places for you to consider the ideas of strategic writing that you can then adapt for your own students; the practical materials are meant as scaffolding, examples of how I extended the chapter concepts in my own classroom. My intent is that both will help you begin to see a bridge between the concepts and the wide variety of ways they can be implemented in any specific classroom.

Overall, the book's organization is designed to help you find your own footholds and handholds on your journey up the mountain. Happy climbing!