2 Essential Processes for Academic Writing

2a

Quotations: On Writing

Writers are notorious for using any reason to keep from working: overresearching, retyping, going to meetings, waxing the floors—anything. *—Gloria Steinem*

I don't wait to be struck by lightning and don't need certain slants of light in order to write.

—Toni Morrison

At the time of writing, I don't write for my friends or myself, either; I write for it, for the pleasure of it.

—Eudora Welty

The ideal view for daily writing, hour on hour, is the blank brick wall of a coldstorage warehouse. Failing this, a stretch of sky will do, cloudless if possible. *—Edna Ferber*

I don't know anything about inspiration because I don't know what inspiration is; I've heard about it, but I never saw it. *—William Faulkner*

Teaching Tip

The facsimile of my writing and revising at the opening of this chapter is completely authentic (though the handwriting is not mine because I tend to scrawl illegibly). I have included this draft to show students that most teachers and professional writers evolve a text rather than produce it in one swoop. When I do this in my writing classes, the students never fail to be surprised that their instructor's first draft could be so rough. You might also call attention to the clumsy opening sentences that I deleted and to other revisions that I made in my first draft.

You might also bring in a few examples of your own drafts. A paragraph or two can suffice. And if you use a word processor, as I do, plan ahead and keep those sentences you love to delete with the press of a key. I have found that a few students sometimes think that my rough drafts are better than their final drafts, but I try to emphasize that such a reaction misses the point. After all, I am not as much of an apprentice writer as the students are. And I am trying to better my writing from a base of where I am, not from a base that I started at back in college.

Background

Over the past several years a number of theories about the process of writing have emerged. In *Discourse: A Critique and Synthesis of Major Theories* (New York: MLA, 1989), Timothy W. Crusius provides a helpful analysis of those put forward by James Kinneavy, James Moffett, James Britton, and Frank D'Angelo. Crusius pulls their views together in an attempt to find a unified view of the concept.

2b–c

Background

Donald Graves was the first to use the term *rehearsing* to describe the activities that precede a completed draft. In Balance the Basics: Let Them Write (*Ford Foundation Papers on Research About Learning*, 1978), he discusses the stage of the writing process in which the writer (mentally and on paper) prepares to write, without yet knowing what that writing will be. Drawing conclusions from his observations of children writing, Graves points out the importance of experimenting with meaning, form, and voices, an attitude of play that is important in making meaning. It allows the writer to make unexpected relationships from surprising inner voices.

Answers: Exercise 2-1

Class discussion will likely reveal disagreement about the main categories and the distribution of items. You can emphasize the role of the individual writer as decision maker. New ideas should be relevant and should not repeat or restate ideas listed in the exercise. the list might be arranged in this way:

Advertising appeals: coming attractions, TV ads, sneak previews, newspaper ads, Internet trailers

Other publicity: movie reviews, word of mouth

People: director, stars

Aspects to feature: how movie was made, topical subject, special effects, book the movie was based on, location, dialogue, photography

Characteristics: provocative [subject], suspense, adventure, excitement

Quotation: On Writing

The best time for planning . . . is when you're doing the dishes. —*Agatha Christie*

Teaching Tip

The concept of a "writing situation" might be new to many students. It is an inclusive term for the combination of topic, purpose, audience, and special requirements such as word or time limits. Each of these four variables influences every decision a writer makes. These variables are especially important in narrowing a topic, as demonstrated by the inclusion of "writing situation" in the examples for narrowing a topic.

Background

Writers, both amateurs and professionals, tend to devise rituals that help them begin and carry out a piece of writing. Some of them are elaborate, some of them relatively simple. They are identifiable by the fact that they are repeated actions that seem to be irrelevant to the task at hand but that are in some way helpful to the writer looking for ideas and ways to express them. Some are silly, such as using the same coffee mug each time one writes, or illogical, such as sweeping the front walk before getting started, but the fact is that they are effective in helping a writer make the transition from some other activity to that of composition.

Writers who are in the process of devising writing rituals can make their individual habits more productive by being aware of which steps are helpful and which are not. They can begin by asking themselves questions about where, when, and with what they write. Where do they get the most work done? Does it afford them access to materials they need? Is it free from interruptions? Does it make them comfortable but not too relaxed? Can they see well? Do they have room to spread out notes and books? What time of day or night do they usually do their writing? Are they alert and energetic at that time? Does it give them a block of time in which to work? Do they use a typewriter? A legal pad? A word processor? A spiral notebook? What objects, environments, or activities that are not directly connected with writing provide a sense of well-being during the process? The answers will vary from one writer to another, but for best results the process should remain fairly constant with the individual.

Rituals are habits that provide structure—reassurance that the writer has done a task this way once before. With each repetition they become more comfortable, making the writer feel more competent, more at home with the act of writing.

Answers: Exercise 2-2

Answers to this Internet-based activity will vary according to topic chosen. The point is that each topic should be explored for sequences (paths). It would be useful, if possible, to do this exercise as a class so that you can help students to negotiate the answers they discover.

Answers: Exercise 2-3

Answers will vary.

Teaching Tip

I've had great success asking students to write at least one journal entry a week that responds to (not summarizes) something that they have read. Students should include a photocopy of the article or pages from the book they've read. On the first day of class I show them a photocopy and sample entry as a model.

Quotation: On Writing

Writing is just having a sheet of paper, a pen and not a shadow of an idea of what you're going to say.

—Françoise Sagan

Teaching Tip

Students may be surprised to learn that all writers find the blank sheet of paper (or empty computer screen) a source of anxiety. The experienced writer knows that the most effective way to move past that feeling is to write something, regardless of its value. Once the clean surface has words on it, other words follow more easily. Unrelated ideas, notes, questions, examples—all help to relieve the writer's discomfort with getting started. A good habit to cultivate is to jot down responses and reactions to writing tasks as soon as they are given.

Quotation: On Writing

Looking back, I imagine I was always writing. Twaddle it was too. But better far write twaddle or anything, anything, than nothing at all. —*Katherine Mansfield*

Answers: Exercise 2-4

Answers will vary.

Background

In his article "To Be Read" (*English Journal* 57 [May 1968]: 686–92; rpt. *Rhetoric and Composition: A Sourcebook for Teachers and Writers*, ed. Richard L. Graves [Portsmouth, NH: Boynton/Cook, 1984]), Ken Macrorie discusses, among other issues, ways to help students arrive at a topic worth their effort. He begins by asking them for freewriting that strives to be honest (in contrast to phony), followed by discussion of strong passages that seem to speak the truth, a slowly developing focus on one subject, an effort to tighten the expression, and then an extension of the discussion to a full-length writing. By acting as editor instead of "grader" or "corrector," the teacher establishes a situation closer to that in which "real" writing takes place. Macrorie describes traditional "themes," papers assigned by teachers on topics that have no context, as papers that are "not meant to be read, but corrected."

Teaching Tip

Journal writing and freewriting are often unpopular with students at first, but on their end-of-the-semester evaluations of my classes, students consistently mention these activities as being among the most helpful in my course. Perhaps one of the reasons students resist at first is that they don't believe that journal writing and freewriting will not be corrected or graded. It is important, however, to respond to students' journals, although you should not feel obliged to read and respond to every entry of every journal. Responses should not be directive or critical but should create an informal dialogue with students that encourages them to discuss their ideas and experiences in greater depth and detail.

Background

Much of what we know about the composing processes of students comes from the work of three researchers and their colleagues. James Britton in *Britain's School Council Project: The Development of Writing Abilities*, 11–18 (London: Macmillan Education, 1975) found that "writing is a deliberate act; one has to make up one's mind to do it." Once we decide to write, he points out, we begin the process by prewriting, which involves our trying to understand and solve a particular writing problem. Also fundamental to our current understanding of the writing process is the work of Janet Emig, reported in *The Composing Processes of Twelfth Graders* (NCTE Research Report No. 13 [Urbana: NCTE, 1971]). As the title suggests, she followed in detail the methods of high school seniors as they made their way through writing tasks. Finally, John R. Hayes and Linda S. Flower have provided a model for other researchers with their "thinking aloud" protocols, verbal descriptions of what writers report they think and do while they compose ("Identifying the Organization of Writing Processes" and "The Dynamics of Composing: Making Plans and Juggling Constraints," *Cognitive Processes in Writing*, ed. Lee W. Gregg and Erwin R. Steinberg [Hillsdale, N.J.: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates, 1980], pp. 3–50).

Although the methods and terminology of these investigators vary, they arrive at fundamental agreement about the writing process.

Background

In "Toward a Phenomenology of Freewriting" (*Journal of Basic Writing* 8 [Fall 1989]: 42–71), Peter Elbow discusses why freewriting is fundamental to his work. He explains that it helps him as a writer and as a teacher because it allows him to move "more easily and fully" into writing and thinking.

Teaching Tip

In *Writing with Power* (New York: Oxford UP, 1981), Peter Elbow suggests that keeping a freewriting diary can help an aspiring writer. Writing for only ten minutes a day can provide "a brief mind sample" of that day. He also discusses a variance of freewriting called looping, which allows the reader a degree of control over the material that the mind produces. Looping involves a series of freewritings about a subject. After writing nonstop for several minutes for the first loop, the writer composes a "center of gravity sentence" that summarizes the main idea in the first loop as precisely as possible. The freewriting of the second loop responds to the center of gravity sentence. For each new loop, the writer should compose a new center of gravity sentence, each loop further refining and elaborating on the main idea. You may want to ask students to try looping as an in-class prewriting activity for a paper, to help choose a topic or to discover a tentative thesis statement.

Quotation: On Writing

Writing is no trouble: you just jot down ideas as they occur to you. The jotting is simplicity itself—it is the occurring which is difficult. *—Stephen Leacock*

Quotation: On Writing

I need noise and interruptions and irritation: irritation and discomfort are a great starter. The loneliness of doing it any other way would kill me. *—Anita Brookner*

Teaching Tip

Mapping can be a refreshing change of pace in place of or in addition to other more traditional idea-gathering techniques. Because mapping is highly visual, it holds a special appeal for some students. Those who hate to do anything formal (such as an outline or even a list) find the apparent anarchy of a map enticing. Students are often engaged by the bunch of balloons developing on the board. Because entire branches of a map can be omitted from an actual essay, dead ends and short roads are not "errors."

Some students take to mapping readily. Others, especially in the beginning, may prefer to have some guidance, at least in the selection of subtopics. For example, an assignment calling for a persuasive essay about air pollution might benefit from a map based on the senses. Ask students to write an example of air pollution in a circle in the centre of the page. Then have them draw a line for each sense and circle the name of that sense (smell, taste, sight, hearing, touch). The students can then draw additional lines and circles for each branch of the map.

Background

On several occasions (e.g., "Understanding Composing," CCC 31 [December 1980]: 363–369), Sondra Perl has described the writing process as recursive, the several stages of planning, drafting, and revising occurring not in a straight, linear fashion, but doubling back on one another as the work takes shape. In the *New York University Education Quarterly* (1979), p. 18, she refers to the process as "retrospective structuring." "Composing," she writes, "does not occur in a straightforward, linear fashion. The process is one of accumulating discrete words or phrases down on the paper and then working from these bits to reflect upon, structure, and then further develop what one means to say." The reaching back and sensing forward have what she describes as "a clarifying effect," the written form serving, as it does, as a window on the intended meaning.

Background

In his essay "Recent Developments in Rhetorical Invention" (*Teaching Composition: 12 Bibliographical Essays*, ed. Gary Tate [Fort Worth: Texas Christian UP, 1987], pp. 1–38), Richard Young classifies the theoretical bases for teaching invention into four main categories: classical invention, romantic invention, dramatism, and tagmemic invention. Classical invention refers to various systems based on the theories of ancient Greek and Roman rhetoricians such as Aristotle and Cicero. Romantic invention, associated with D. Gordon Rohman, tries to tap into the mysterious nonconscious and nonrational creative powers of the mind and often eschews formal methods of invention. Dramatistic invention is based on Kenneth Burke's pentad of agent, scene, act, agency, and purpose, first described in *A Grammar of Motives* (1945). Tagmemic invention is derived from Kenneth Pike's tagmemic linguistic theory, but it has its fullest realization in Richard Young, Alton Becker, and Kenneth Pike's *Rhetoric: Discovery and Change* (1970).

Background

In "Habits of Mind: Historical Configurations of Textual Ownership in Peer Writing Groups" (College Composition and Communication, May 1998: 234–55), Candace Spigelman argues that students' attitudes about authorship and intellectual property rights are evidence of cultural "habits of mind." She examines Western historical ideas that have influenced current concepts of textual ownership.

Quotation: On Writing

Form . . . is an arousing and fulfillment of desire. A work has form in so far as one part of it leads a reader to anticipate another part, to be gratified by the sequence. —*Kenneth Burke,* Counter-Statement

Teaching Tip

In *The Elements of Invention* (New York: Macmillan, 1990), Jeanne H. Simpson suggests six guidelines for students using any invention system:

1. Try to do all the steps in an invention system. If you don't, the world won't end, but you might miss a good opportunity to explore an idea.

2. Ignore redundancies. Most invention systems will have you repeating yourself a bit. It's all right to do that. In fact, you may get a better grip on a slippery idea the second time you write about it.

3. Write as much as you can in response to any step in a system. Don't worry about the beauty of your writing; the main thing is to get your ideas down on paper where you can see them and work with them.

4. Forget about grammar, punctuation, and spelling for now. . . . Just dump the ideas down however you can. You can clean them up later.

5. Keep going, even if you are drawing a blank. Make the pen, pencil, or cursor move no matter what. . . . Eventually, something will occur to you.

6. Reward yourself when you've finished a good workout with an invention system. Take a break, perhaps have a snack. A mental "cool-down" period is often as important as a physical one; use it to help you gain some perspective on what you have written so far (2–3).

"Doing invention the right way," Simpson writes, "just means doing it consistently and with commitment. The only wrong answer in invention is a blank page" (3).

Quotation: On Writing

All you need is a room without any particular interruptions. —*John Dos Passos*

Background

For those teachers who encounter difficulty in following the various invention theories proposed by Kenneth Burke and Ken Macrorie, as well as by Richard Young, Alton Becker, and Kenneth Pike, help is available in Peggy Parris's "Helping Snoopy through the Dark and Stormy Night: Heuristics for Creative Writing" (*Iowa English Bulletin* 33 [1984]: 26–30). She discusses how Burke's pentad, Young, Becker, and Pike's tagmemic matrix, and Macrorie's freewriting can be used to teach creative writing.

Background

In the chapter on "Shaping Discourse" in *A Rhetoric for Writing Teachers*, 2nd ed. (New York: Oxford UP, 1987, pp. 158–70), Erika Lindemann warns teachers and students against making inflexible writing plans that cause them to force ideas into a prescribed form. In particular, she points out that slavishly following an outline can limit a writer's options. It can, for example, prevent a writer from discovering the material's organic unity or from making choices that might improve the piece. Rigid adherence to an outline, says Lindemann, can create an inadequate and incomplete understanding of the paper, since an outline may offer little help in determining proportions or deciding on rhetorical strategies. In addition, it may also divert a writer from considering audience and purpose.

2d

Teaching Tip

The notion of focus in a thesis statement might be new to some students. A useful analogy can be that the topic is the subject but the focus is the predicate. Without predication, sentences make no assertion. As Josephine Miles said in her important monograph "Working Out Ideas: Predication and Other Uses of Language": "Sentence making is predication, and to predicate is to assert an idea, selecting and treating facts from a point of view." Predication says something about, asserts something about, answers a

question about, takes a position about the topic. It may, for example, define the topic, describe it, evaluate it, compare it to something, explain its purpose, or identify its causes. The topic of this section of the *S & S Handbook for Writers* is "a thesis statement." The predicate of the opening sentence of the section makes an assertion about "a thesis statement" by defining what one is—it "is the central message of an essay." A different predicate—for example, that a thesis statement "helps the writer focus the essay"—would change the focus, purpose, and direction of this section.

Background

In "Writing as Process: How Writing Finds Its Own Meaning" (*Eight Approaches to Teaching Composition*, ed. Timothy Donovan and Ben McClelland [NCTE, 1980], pp. 3–20), Donald Murray discusses four forces that interact as the writer goes through the stages of rehearsing, drafting, and revising, moving in a recursive manner from exploration to clarification. They are the forces of collecting and connecting, writing and reading. Although writing may be ignited by any one of these forces in conjunction with any other, says Murray, once writing has begun, all of them begin to interact with each other. The writer is often unaware of this interaction, as innate curiosity leads naturally to the act of collecting information, which at some point calls for control and order that make the act of connecting necessary. Connections, in turn, make the writer see information in a new way, hence generating more collected data. The acts of writing and reading act in a similar fashion. The writer sets down what is heard mentally, then reads the product, checking it against what was heard, then rewrites it. Murray asserts that although each writing act is a complex, instantaneous interaction, the scale tips rapidly from one force to the other in response to the various needs of the writer dealing with rehearsing, drafting, or revising.

Quotation: On Writing

I like a room with a view, preferably a long view. I dislike looking out on gardens. I prefer looking at the sea, or ships, or anything which has a vista to it. *—Norman Mailer*

Teaching Tip

Getting started seems hardest for writers at the point when they have to move from planning and shaping to actual writing. Dealing with writer's block is no small matter for writers, instructors of writing, and students. You might take some class time to discuss myths about writing. We are interested in gathering more myths. If you or your students think of any, please e-mail us the myth/truth information for publication—with a byline—in the next edition of this Instructor's Manual: <troykalq@nyc.rr.com>.

Background

Jeanette Harris explores the subject of invention in "Rethinking Invention" (*Freshman English News* 17 [Fall 1988]: 13–16). She calls for teachers to encourage students to include introspection and exploration of subjects in their heuristics.

Quotation: On Writing

My writing is a conscious letter to myself. It's a way for me to hold on to pieces as I grow and change and get on with my life. *—Joan Stein*

Answers: Exercise 2-5

A. The fourth thesis statement succeeds because it states a main idea (about magazine advertisements' appeal to readers); it reflects a purpose (to persuade); it has a focus (that magazine advertisements must be skilfully done); and it briefly presents subdivisions (language, colour, and design). The first and second thesis statements are too general, showing neither a purpose nor a focus. The third thesis statement shows a persuasive purpose but is still too general and has no focus ("must" is not explained).

B. The fourth thesis statement succeeds because it states a main idea (about evolving tennis skills); it reflects a purpose (to inform); it has a focus (why champion players need different skills today); and it briefly presents subdivisions (racquet technology and serving styles). The first statement is too general and shows minimal purpose and focus. The second statement is also vague and unfocused, with no expressed purpose. The third statement reflects an informative purpose but is too vague ("various skills") to provide a focus.

C. The fourth statement succeeds because it states a subject (Thomson's painting techniques); it conveys a purpose (to inform); it has a focus (the influences on Thomson's techniques); and it subdivides the exposition into education and professional background. The first statement lacks focus and purpose. The second statement lacks focus: although it presents information, it clearly suggests neither an informative nor a persuasive purpose. The third thesis statement states a subject and demonstrates a focus (a critical attitude toward one version of Thomson's biography) but does not convey explicitly the essay's purpose.

D. The fourth thesis statement succeeds because it states a main idea (the need to raise personal vehicle emissions standards); it reflects a purpose (to persuade); and it has a focus (the action that governments should take). The first statement uses vague language ("pay attention"; "environment") and suggests neither a persuasive not an informative intent. The second statement reflects a persuasive purpose, but "worry" is vague. The third statement reflects either an informative or persuasive purpose, but the broad claim is so obvious that it will not lead to an effective paper.

E. The fourth statement succeeds because it states a main idea (the benefits of lowering the voting age); it states its persuasive purpose with vigour; it has a focus (students' behaviour and attitudes in the context of politics); and it introduces subtopics to be treated in the argument. The first statement relies on vague language ("many people"; "interested") and lacks a purpose or focus. The second statement suggests an informative purpose but relies on vague language ("dissatisfied"; "political process"). The third statement could introduce either an informative or a persuasive paper; it states its topic but lacks focus.

Answers: Exercise 2-6

1. The thesis is good because it reflects the purpose (to persuade), states a main idea, and focuses specifically on logical subdivisions of the topic.

2. The thesis suggests that the paper will do one of the things that analysis of an artwork often does: evaluate in an attempt to persuade. The words "most moving," however, are vague and express only the viewer's emotional response. A brief indication of subdivisions (including an aesthetic evaluation) will help complete the analysis.

3. The thesis, though specific and focused, does not reflect a careful response to the assignment: the assignment requires an informative report, but this thesis reflects a persuasive purpose.

4. This thesis is good because it states a main idea, reflects a purpose (to inform), and includes a focus. However, the thesis statement could be improved by including concrete numbers or comparative statistics.

5. This thesis does not address the assignment adequately because it reflects an informative rather than a persuasive purpose, as was required by the assignment.

Alternative Exercise

Write thesis statements for persuasive papers on the following topics, making sure that they have the five characteristics of a good thesis statement listed in the Basic Requirements Quick Reference chart.

1. Topic: hiphop music

2. Topic: athletic scholarships

3. Topic: ethnic foods

4. Topic: a holiday ritual

5. Topic: mothers and daughters

Teaching Tip

You may want to ask your students to test their thesis statements by exchanging them with one another. By asking the readers to answer questions about the thesis statements, the writers may discover weaknesses (and strengths) that were not apparent to them. Some questions they can ask are the following:

1. Is the main idea, the central point, clearly stated?

2. Is the purpose of the essay clear?

3. What is the purpose: to inform or persuade?

4. What is the focus of the essay?

5. Does the thesis statement identify the major subdivisions of the essay's topic?

6. Does it make the topic seem interesting?

7. Can this thesis be developed in the time available?

8. Can this thesis be developed in an essay of the length planned?

9. Is the thesis limited enough for development, but general enough to be worth the effort?

10. Is the thesis stated in specific terms? Does it avoid overly general, vague ones?

2e–h

Teaching Tip

Students can practise making outlines by dealing with published essays. They will sometimes discover that an essay lacks a clearly defined order, or, on the other hand, they may find ideas in the work that they missed before dividing it into its major headings and subheadings. You should prepare students for this exercise by composing an outline of one or two short essays with the class, perhaps including one essay without a well-defined organization. You may find it helpful to use an overhead projector for displaying the essay or writing the outline. Students can then prepare a topic outline or a sentence outline on a different essay. You might ask them to compare their outlines to see if they each found the same emphases and order of development.

Quotation: On Writing

Prose is architecture, not interior decoration. —*Ernest Hemingway*

Teaching Tip

If your students have trouble organizing an outline, you might suggest that they write each item on an index card. The ability to move the cards around, make piles, and easily eliminate items often facilitates students' work.

Answers: Exercise 2-7

Answers may vary.
Thesis statement: Taxpayers should demand more investment in public transportation.

I. Inadequate public transportation
    A. Cities need to move residents
        1. Increased population
        2. Good responses
        3. Poor responses
    B. People need to move easily and cheaply
        1. Dependent on cars
        2. Cheaper and easier in Europe

II. Lack of public transportation = problems
    A. Cars = pollution
    B. Limited space for new roads and highways
    C. Congestion limits productivity
    D. Some people cannot drive
        1. Young and old don't drive
        2. Expense of cars

III. Improving public transportation possible
    A. Bus service and light rail
    B. Wider national rail
    C. Even though costly, affordable
        1. Money from new roads
        2. New transportation = jobs = new tax base
        3. Savings offset tax increases

Teaching Tip

Computers are increasingly helpful in organizing material and preparing outlines. Several software programs are commercially available for use in creating short outlines that can be expanded into more complex ones. They encourage experimentation with ideas and arrangements because they are flexible. Outlines can be quickly and easily expanded by the addition of subheadings or tightened by the removal of subheadings from the screen, though the writer can keep them available for possible inclusion.

Teaching Tip

Writers use outlines in a variety of ways. They turn to them, for example, at different stages of the composing process. Whereas some find it productive to move from mapping or freewriting directly into a listing of ideas in a particular order, using the outline to plan the drafting process, others use outlines to check the organization of a draft after it is written, testing to see if the paper has order and balance. Some writers find topic outlines helpful; some prefer a sentence outline. Each writer has to find the shaping strategies that prove to be most effective in his or her case.

Quotation: On Writing

In any work that is truly creative, I believe, the writer cannot be omniscient in advance about the effects that he [or she] proposes to produce. The suspense of a novel is not only in the reader, but in the novelist, who is intensely curious about what will happen to the hero. *—Mary McCarthy*

Background

Maxine Hairston states in "Different Products, Different Processes: A Theory about Writing" (*College Composition and Communication* [December 1986]: 442–52) that experienced writers employ different composing processes for different types of writing. Experienced writers generally give little thought to composing "routine maintenance or message writing"—brief notes and memos, lists, thank-you letters, and other short, simple writing that keeps "organizations and personal relationships functioning" (443). In extended "self-limiting" writing such as summaries, most reports, and essay examinations, writers know most of what they want to say and accomplish before they begin. Writers work mainly on organization, style, stance, and tone as they draft and revise, often following "traditional formulas," but skilled writers usually are able to complete these writing tasks easily and quickly, unless the paper is for a particularly important or difficult audience (444). "Extended reflective writing" is usually the most time-consuming and difficult but often the most satisfying to write. In these writings, writers make sense of their lives and their world and discover most of what they want to say only as they write. This kind of writing requires writers to "take risks because they are working at the edge of their abilities, operating in unfamiliar territory" (445). Writing courses, Hairston argues, should give students opportunities to practice self-limiting writing as well as reflective writing.

Quotation: On Writing

There is always a point in the writing of a piece when I sit in a room literally papered with false starts and cannot put one word after another and imagine that I have suffered a small stroke, leaving me apparently undamaged but actually aphasic. *—Joan Didion*

Background

Erica E. Goode cites tips for people who tend to procrastinate. They include the following helpful suggestions.

1. Break your work into small, clearly defined steps. Instead of vowing vaguely to "catch up on paperwork," resolve to spend one hour sorting out the papers on your desk.

2. Reward yourself for progress toward your goal. Ice cream is nice, as is a walk in the park.

3. The hardest step to take is the first, so pick something easy. A task that can be polished off in fifteen minutes is a good one for a starter.

4. Set a series of small but realistic deadlines rather than a final date.

5. Enlist support. Other people may be able to tell you if you're setting up expectations that are impossible to meet.

2i–k

Teaching Tip

Revising is a process, just as composing is a process. Students may find it helpful to examine and make conscious the steps they go through when revising, editing, and proofreading. Here are some questions they can use:

1. What helped you make the mental shift from suspending judgment to making judgments?
2. Did you use the questions in material supplied by your instructor or the revision checklist in Box 2.10?
3. If you had peer readers, did you use their suggestions? Did you use all of them? If some of them, which ones? Why?
4. Did you need to make any changes in your introduction or conclusion because of other changes in your text? Explain.
5. Was your title still appropriate? Explain.
6. Where did you add new words, sentences, or paragraphs? Explain.
7. Where did you cut out words, sentences, or paragraphs? Explain.
8. Did you change the sequence of paragraphs? Explain.
9. Did you edit your paper in a single reading, or look for possible errors in a series of readings? Explain.
10. Did you use a checklist, either the one in this chapter or one supplied by your instructor, to examine your writing for grammar, spelling, punctuation, and capitalization problems? How did it help or not help?

Teaching Tip

Students may find it helpful to know that the strengths and weaknesses in a piece of writing are often easier for the writer to recognize if a "cooling off" period intervenes between the time of writing and the

time of revision. If there is an opportunity to put the piece away for a day or so, the writer returns to it not as the composer but as a reader, thus finding it easier to spot confusing passages or awkward statements. Because students are not famous for working far ahead of schedule, they should be encouraged to provide at least a few hours to distance themselves from the writing before trying to revise it. However, if too much time elapses between the draft and the rereading, the writer is likely to lose the sense of purpose and meaning that accompanied the original effort.

Quotation: On Writing

One never notices what has been done; one can only see what remains to be done. —*Marie Curie*

Teaching Tip

To help students become aware of the importance of titles, ask them to experiment with devising alternative titles, both direct and indirect ones, for each other's essays or for short essays that they find in magazines or in their readers. Before doing so, students need to state the thesis of the piece they intend to retitle. After retitling, they can then explain in writing their rationale for the new titles.

Teaching Tip

Lynn says, "Many students think that revisers are poor writers. Indeed, I have been scolded more than once by people who have seen me writing in waiting rooms, on the bus, or on a park bench: 'Don't you know not to make a mess when you write?' The tone is always well-meaning, as if the person is trying to help me out of a deep difficulty I seem to be having. I have always been amazed at how forward strangers can be after watching me write while they supposedly stare straight ahead. Some people start to squirm, and the wise ones simply move away. But a few hardy folks want to let me know that I could suddenly become 'a writer' if only I would stop crossing out and drawing arrows on my paper. For a while, the confrontations inhibited me about writing outside my home, but I soon became so interested in the reactions that I got caught up in the 'research' of the situations. (Try it sometime—a doctor's office or a barber or beauty shop would be prime territory.) Students are always similarly surprised when they see how messy real writing can be."

Teaching Tip

Many of us have had the experience of reading a student's revision of an essay that we responded to in an earlier draft, only to find that most of our comments have been ignored. The revision turns out to be the original essay with a few spelling errors corrected. Sometimes this happens because students do not know how to respond fully to an instructor's comments.

One way to demystify comments is to have the class respond collectively to the instructor's comments on Sara Cardini's second draft (2y.2). Ask the students to read the instructor's comments on Cardini's essay and decide what Cardini might do in response to each one. You might lead a discussion of the options for resolving each problem. As you come to each comment, allow time for students to draft revisions or to look up the needed information in their Handbook. Ask students for their revisions at each comment, and keep students alert to the many good alternatives for responses to the instructor's questions. You might also point out that responses are more likely to be identical to the coded comments of the instructor because those call for corrections of grammar or punctuation.

A useful alternative to the comment-by-comment class discussion is to assign the entire revision as a home or class exercise. Then, students can discuss their thought-through answers and compare their results. As much as possible, try to use copies of the material or overhead transparencies or PowerPoint for the discussion of alternate complete third drafts. Students often cannot follow the discussion if it relies on memory of various similar versions.

Teaching Tip

At the other end of the spectrum from nonrevisers are overrevisers. Some students are never satisfied with their work and so never hand it in. This phenomenon is a form of writer's block. Students who suffer from this sort of inhibition often need a little special treatment at first. For example, you might help such students by telling them that for the first few assignments, you will consider their work to be "in progress," even its final version. You might also share with them the words of Eudora Welty:

> I know I can never get it perfect. You just have to know when you've done it the best way. A friend of mine who is a writer said he kept thirteen drafts of a story and put them all in a drawer. Years later he went back, and it was number 7 that was the right one. That taught me a real, true lesson.

Teaching Tip

A personal editing checklist, a list of problems that recur from one piece of writing to the next, can help any writer note potential trouble spots. You may want to suggest that students go through returned papers, listing each marked error and grouping those that are similar, such as spelling errors, subject-verb agreement errors, and comma splices. After becoming aware of the kinds of problems and patterns that are most likely to occur, the writer can devise ways of checking new writing to make sure such errors are not present. For example, if the s has been left off third-person singular verbs, the student should go through each new paper checking each such construction for agreement.

Background

Online Writing Labs (OWLs) can create global communities by helping writers connect with one another and form supportive networks. However, to do this effectively, argues writing centre consultant Beth Godbee ("Community Building in Online Writing Centers," *Praxis: A Writing Center Journal* 3.1, Spring 2005 <http://www.press.umich.edu/jep/08-01/ ferris.html>), online writing centres need to avoid replicating the one-on-one tutorial of the face-to-face centre, nor need they simply transfer a question-and-answer format to a virtual environment. Godbee admonishes instructors to heed the advice of those scholars who are calling for more small-group sessions and larger workshops online. OWLs can provide students and tutors the opportunity to explore various sources together as they meet in online libraries, collaborate on Internet searches, and evaluate sources and propose ideas synchronously. Tutors themselves can work together, sharing their expertise to provide assistance to students in an interactive electronic environment.

Background

Recognizing that many instructors come to online courses as novices, with limited or no opportunity for the thorough training provided by a few exceptional programs, educators Beth L. Hewett and Christa Ehmann Powers call for those who have implemented successful programs to provide comprehensive and

systematic online support for online instruction ("How Do You Ground Your Training?" *Kairos: Journal of Rhetoric, Technology, and Pedagogy* 10.1, Fall 2005 <http://english.ttu.edu.kairos/10.1/binder.html?praxis/hewett/index.htm>). If clearly stated goals, supportive measures, and a variety of training strategies become a part of the support that instructors in online environments provide for one another, Hewett and Powers argue that all can learn not only the processes that build success but also the principles that ground these practices.

See also Hewett and Powers, *Preparing Educators for Online Writing Instruction: Principles and Processes* (NCTE, 2004).

The Impossible and the Possible: Realistic Goals for Courses in Writing

by Linda Julian, *Furman University*

Well before the bell signals the first class meeting, teachers of writing must have come to terms with goals which are realistic for a college writing course. In other words, we must understand what is possible given the constraints of time and the backgrounds and attitudes of our students. Many teachers get so caught up in trying to teach the impossible that frustration clouds their vision of the possible.

The best confidence builder—and one too often neglected by most of us—is a long, hard look at what is possible during a term. Although the following list of goals is not comprehensive, most teachers would agree that these goals are realizable for most students in a single course in composition.

1. We can help students understand that they can learn to write. Building a positive attitude is essential. We can build the kind of confidence that will ensure an interest in writing long after the students have left our classes.

2. We can help students become aware of the role of writing in their lives. It is both possible and essential to show students that even in this age so often dominated by images, writing plays a major part in everything they do—from checking the weather in the newspaper to looking at the menu in a fast-food restaurant to playing a computer video game. We can help them see the need for learning to write.

3. We can help students learn to use technology to empower them as writers. By integrating technology into our courses, we can help students see how technology offers rich possibilities for research, collaborative work, peer review, and presentation of their writing.

4. We can help students realize that writing is a tool for learning about themselves and the world. We can help students discover that a paper is taking a direction they have not planned on. From that point, we can show them that this departure from their expectation is teaching them what they are really trying to say.

5. We can help students realize that writing is a process. Many students think that writers are born being able to write and that a piece of writing springs, fully finished, from the brain of a "real" writer. We can certainly show students that all writing involves stages and that each stage can be learned. (See Troyka & Hesse, *Simon & Schuster Handbook for Writers*, Chapter 2, hereafter referred to as Troyka & Hesse.)

6. We can show students that brainstorming a topic and writing a draft of a paper can give rise to questions that lead them to new ideas and connections. (See Troyka & Hesse, Chapter 2.)

7. We can help our students see the importance of revision. We can use peer critiquing and our own comments to help students see that papers grow slowly through definite stages, each of which requires full development, with revision being perhaps the most important. We can show them that revision is more than patching up problems with usage and mending a few awkward sentences, and instead that it involves several stages of reconceiving the purpose of the paper and reviewing its effect on the audience. (See Troyka & Hesse, Chapter 2, section i.)

8. We can help students understand that a piece of writing is never finished. As a part of learning the stages that make up the process of writing, students can learn that writers finally let go of a piece of writing when they have revised it enough to satisfy the demands of the situation but that they rarely think they have written something that is perfect and defies improvement. (See Troyka & Hesse, Chapter 2, sections i, j, and k.)

9. We can help our students understand the importance of structure in writing. We can show students the relative merits of various kinds of sentences, the effectiveness of various kinds of paragraph structure, and the effectiveness of structure in an essay. Students may not be able to apply all of the principles of structure that we show them, but making them aware of structure is important and possible. (See Troyka & Hesse, especially Chapters 1, 3, 5, and 7.)

10. We can help our students understand what a paragraph is and how to write a coherent one. We can acquaint students with various methods for developing paragraphs that suit the audience and topic with which they are working. Chapter 3 of the Troyka & Hesse Handbook explains many methods of paragraph development and gives interesting, easy-to-grasp examples of each. It also provides a clear explanation of how to make paragraphs coherent and unified. By teaching students how to write effective paragraphs, we can help ensure the sturdiness of the groundwork on which they will eventually build coherent, effective essays.

11. We can help students understand the importance of making clear connections between ideas. It is possible to teach students to draw logical conclusions, to make their thoughts coherent, to support their generalizations with evidence. We can teach them how to make connections among ideas in their own writing and to look for them in the writing of others. (See Troyka & Hesse, Chapters 3, 4, and 5.)

12. We can help students understand the nature and the importance of the audience. Too many students think that English papers are written only for the English teacher. In making this assumption, they do not realize that many choices they make as writers depend on defining the audience for a given piece of work. We can help students realize that as writers they belong to a community of readers and writers. In short, we can teach students that they do not write in a vacuum. (See Troyka & Hesse, Chapter 1.)

13. We can help students understand that good grammar is not the same thing as effective writing. Although good grammar helps make writing clear and more acceptable to some audiences, it is a far different thing from the process of writing. We can, and must, clarify this important point for students. Part 3 of Troyka & Hesse's Handbook clearly presents basic grammar, but it does so in a positive way that should minimize students' feelings of inadequacy with grammar.

14. We can help our students understand that inflated diction does not equal sophisticated thinking. In the same way that many students equate good grammar with "good" writing, many students equate big words with elevated style and thought. We must show students that the most effective writing is that which puts clear, simple language together in a coherent and interesting way. (See Troyka & Hesse, Chapter 12.)

15. We can help students understand what an essay is. Experienced teachers know that even the brightest students have read few essays and that most students have only vague notions of what an essay really is. Students frequently call them "stories," and they think that essays, invented by English teachers, are found only in school. Helping students define the term *essay* is important, as is showing them where they can find good essays being published today.

16. We can help our students understand how to use a dictionary. Students think that all dictionaries are created equal, and they think of a dictionary as a place to look up a word to check spelling or meaning. We need to acquaint them with the aids for using the dictionary, given in each one, and we need to show them the value of the prefatory matter in the dictionary. We can help them see the value of both desk dictionaries and unabridged dictionaries. (See Troyka & Hesse Handbook Chapter 12, section d.)

17. We can help students learn to use a handbook to find answers to questions they have about writing. Too often many of us assume that because we know what's in a handbook and how to find it, students will as well. We should take some time to show students how to use the book we have chosen. To a great extent, knowledge is knowing where to find out what one needs to know. Encouraging students to read Troyka & Hesse's "Preface to Students" likely will help students feel that they are part of the book and that Troyka and Hesse have considered their needs. The easy-tofind information located before the Preface, "How to Use Your Handbook," will also help students become independent learners.

18. We can help students understand that they have a responsibility to be critical readers. Most students think that if something is published, it must be important or "good." We can help them understand how to recognize the flaws in scholarship and logic that make much published work inferior. (See Troyka & Hesse, Chapter 4.)

19. We can help students see that they live in a community of readers and writers, a community which can grow in mutual understanding and respect only through careful, sensitive reading and writing that will promote dialogue between groups of different genders, ethnic origins, ages, socioeconomic class, and geographic areas. (See Troyka & Hesse, Chapters 1 and 6.)

20. We can, and must, help students realize that writing is neither "good" nor "bad." Too often our students come to us having been labeled by themselves or by others as "good" writers or "bad" writers; but we can help them see that a better way of judging writing is to consider the effectiveness of a piece of writing in its context.

Taking stock of what we can do in a single course contributes significantly to our own sense of confidence in our ability to teach a stimulating class. My own experience has shown me clearly that students respond with more assurance and interest when they sense my confidence in achieving these goals.

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