

William Waller

I realized early in the semester that if I were sincere about wanting to teach my students something about composition that would be useful to them, I had to make two painful concessions. First, I have to admit that what I was really teaching was not an art, but a skill; aesthetic matters had to be subordinated to mechanical ones. Second, I had to be practical, not idealistic. The students needed instruction that would benefit them in their other classes more than they needed to be able to see heaven in a wild flower. Specifically, they needed to learn how to write research papers, not poems. Even though I surrendered to practicality, I still thought there must be some way to make the spiritless, sterile, and standard teaching of the research paper somehow more aesthetically appealing--both to myself and the students. Thus, my goal was twofold: to provide the students with the necessary conventional tutelage about research papers, and to give them an opportunity to stimulate and "tickle" their own imaginations during the often tedious research process. Journal writing seemed the best way to achieve my goal.

The term paper journal writing began about three weeks before the term papers were due. The requirements for the journals were simple. The students could write about anything at all in any style they chose to affect, but their entries had to relate to their term paper topics (which, at this time, about three-fourths of the class had already selected) in some fashion. I was quite accommodating here; entries about rude librarians or annoying micromedia machines were acceptable. As it turned out, I never told a student that his or her entry strayed too far from the subject. The students were told that the journals would not affect their grade unless they failed to submit one. Mistakes in spelling, punctuation, grammar, syntax, or other mechanics were not penalized, or even pointed out, and I urged the students to be as experimental, creative, or informal as they liked. I encouraged a daily output which ranged from four grammatically complete sentences to one page. I tried to be as emphatic as I could about the importance of writing every day (an importance I will discuss in more detail later). I told the class I preferred four sentences a day to fifty pages the night before.

Obviously it would have been impossible to prove whether the students were writing every day. To insure that the students would not wait until the last possible millisecond to begin to even think about their term papers, and to compensate for the inevitable truth that some of the students--armed with four different-colored ink pens, three different-colored Flair pens, a number one and a number three pencil, and a typewriter--would write their gaudy journals the night before, I initiated free writing sessions concurrently with the journal writing. The rules (or lack of them) for the free writing were the same as those for the journals. The only difference was that the students had to write for fifteen minutes each class period. They could not say what they had to say in five minutes and quit (as they could with the journals); they had to fill the time with writing and the subject matter was always their term paper topics.¹

I confess I had so many great expectations about the journals that only a few of my wishes for them had to come true to make the unit an unqualified

success. The journals seemed like a good idea for so many reasons. First of all, as I said before, freshman composition teachers must teach writing as a skill, not an art; thus, improvement comes with practice instead of divine inspiration. Simply put, to write better one must write more (as anyone knows), and the journals would require more writing.

Also I thought it was essential to try to prevent the students from waiting until the deadline for the papers was frighteningly imminent before they began to work on them. Many educational psychologists have conducted carefully controlled experiments that have substantiated the superiority of spaced learning to massed learning (or "cramming").² Distributed research and writing allows the student to take advantage of the "incubation" phenomenon. During incubation the student assimilates information and ideas when he is not consciously thinking about them. Maxine Hairston explains it like this:

At this point [during incubation], some writers stop thinking systematically about the assignment, either deliberately or out of frustration. They turn their attention to something else, perhaps sports or a movie or another course, and seem not to be working. But the subconscious mind is working, absorbing and sorting the data that has been given to it. The writer is, as it were, "sleeping on the problem."³

Therefore if there is any validity to incubation as an advantage to learning, and there seems to be, journal writing, done regularly and well in advance of the deadline, would certainly exploit this advantage.

The lack of standards of right and wrong in the journals, and the suspension of a concern for technical correctness, hopefully made the blank page less threatening to the students. Free writing advocate Peter Elbow believes that what often holds the timid writer back is a stifling attempt to write and "edit" at the same time. To Elbow, "it's an unnecessary burden to try to think of words and also worry at the same time whether they're the right words."⁴ I feel strongly that total freedom from grammatical, organizational, stylistic--or any--restraints is the keynote to a successful journal. This position cannot be compromised; even the most egregious mechanical errors should be left alone. The student should be made aware of only those parts of his journal that are in some way good.

The term paper journals seemed like a workable idea also because they could potentially encompass several aspects of composition. For example, they could be used for prewriting; the student could simply sort out and organize his facts if he wished. They also allowed for random revision. That is, the student could choose any section of his paper and practice rewriting it. There was no need to start at the beginning and finish at the end. They could just "jump in" wherever they wanted. Sir Philip Sidney also supports this strategy. He writes, "If they will represent an history, they must not (as Horace saith) begin ab ovo, but they must come to the principal point of that one action which they will represent."⁵ I am of course assuming here that what would work for "representing an history" would also work for writing a term paper.

I had hoped the journals would help to eliminate some of the "scissors and paste" term papers wherein the authors have done little more than arrange two dozen quotes from one dozen sources in a supposedly logical sequence. The journals would, ideally, stimulate original thinking. Hopefully the students would experience the revelation that they too had something to say about their subjects.

Finally, I had two other hopes for the journals. First I felt that since the students had to write about their term papers, their journals would not become simple diaries. My other hope, I admit, was prompted by my cynicism. I believed the journals and daily thinking and writing on their topics might be a possible barrier against plagiarism in two ways: either the students would spend so much time on their subjects that they would feel as though they might as well translate their effort into a paper, or perhaps blatant discrepancies between journals and papers would be a clue that something was amiss.

Now that I have said what I had hoped and expected to happen because of the journals, I am, in fairness to pedagogical objectivity, duty bound to report what in fact did happen. Happily, many of the results were encouraging and even a few of my dreams became realities. But the most satisfying consequences were the pleasant surprises that emerged, those instances of serendipitous achievement.

The journals did seem to make the students more aware of the impending deadline; consequently, the likelihood that they would finally start to do something increased in direct proportion to the mounting guilt about having done nothing substantial yet. Perhaps I should let the students speak for themselves.

It seems to me that we are comming down to the wire on the term papers pretty fast. the 4 walls of my room feel as if they are begining to close in on me more and more each day as the many dedlines of the semester approach.⁶

And another student writes, "For sometime now I have been telling myself I'll start my term paper tomorrow. Now with less than two weeks left, I decided I better get started."

The journals proved to be a helpful way to gauge the progress of the class as a whole. For example, while most students would be writing about their troubles with the organization of the rough draft, one or two others revealed through their journals that they were still having problems finding books and choosing a specific topic from a broad area. Although some students (and some professional writers too) write better when they have exhausted all of their procrastinations and the deadline is so close that they have no choice but to start, no student enjoys lagging behind the rest of the class. No matter how well he writes under pressure he cannot avoid thinking--since his classmates are so far ahead of him--that he better get going.

Many students, either intentionally or not, would articulate in their journals the pervading strategy behind such things as the narrowing of a topic or the structuring of a paper. One student wrote a mini-process essay explaining how she leafed through her psychology notebook, chose units she liked, eliminated all units except the one on "personality," selected the

psychologists within the unit who interested her most, and picked Freud as her topic. So, in about two-thirds of a page she had tapered her topic from psychology to personality to Freud. Within a week after that she had trimmed her subject down to "Freud and the interpretation of dreams." A student whose topic was medieval chants, after reading general and specific works on the subject, decided the best way to use her sources and organize her paper was to move from the general to the specific because the "specific information made the general parts complete."

I found that the journals were sometimes a window into the mind of the student who rarely speaks in class. Every teacher, at some time or another, has a student who attends every class, always hands in assignments on time (or early), does excellent work, and never talks. Through journals the teacher has a better chance of getting to know a student like this, for in journals the student is more willing to reveal his ideas about subjects other than those assigned.

I was especially pleased that the journals did occasionally provoke some original thought. Here I should say that I never read selections from the journals aloud to the class, but I would, either in class or individual conferences, comment on the passages I thought were in some way fresh or better yet, worth developing further in the term paper itself. For example, the aforementioned "medieval chants" student wrote, "To introduce the medieval period, I think it's important to write a little about the very beginning of music, where it came from and why?" From this sprang first a discussion about the arts as cultural yardsticks, then a discussion of how good research papers should be more than well organized and well written (although these standards are about all we should aim for in Freshman Composition); they should be significant, and they should stand up to the challenge "So what?". A student whose term paper was on the increasing role of missiles in warfare was chagrined in a journal entry because he discovered an article that claimed the Russians had developed a system to render missiles obsolete; thus, the student's entire thesis was destroyed. This sparked a discussion about the importance of updating research since drastic changes happen quickly.

By discovering and encouraging imaginative thought early in the research process, the teacher can better guide the student, and can suggest which paths to pursue and which to avoid. From this I would generalize and say that what proved to be one of the most beneficial features of the unit was that it made me teach research papers better. Being an inexperienced teacher, I could not possibly foresee the range of problems the students would have while working on their papers. Therefore, in order to help the students, the students would first have to tell me, specifically, what their problems were. The journals were a way for them to do this. Indeed, the suggestion in the attached appendix that the students write about any frustration or dead end they encountered elicited more entries by far than any other.

Perhaps a few examples would better illustrate how the journals made me teach the research paper better. For instance, many of the journal entries in the first week or so told of the students' inability to use the library. People would wander about the library aimlessly or they would walk up and down the stairs in vain because they failed to consult the daily

circulation booklet to see if the book they needed was already checked out. Also students would read irrelevant and useless material because they did not think to check indexes, chapter titles, bibliographies, etc. So at some stages I was more a reference librarian than an English teacher. A few students did not understand how one could possibly write a research paper that was totally unplagiarized and seventy percent their own prose at the same time, so I would try to make myself clearer, realize I was failing, and tell them to worry more about plagiarism than originality. A couple students could not bear to replace their beloved "ibid, p. 23" with "Smith, p. 23," so I would explain how the new way is much simpler to one who has never written a footnote, and how consistency within and adherence to a chosen convention (luckily no one complained that the choice was mine, not theirs) were more important than the relative merits of different conventions. While a few of the better students were frustrated in their journals because they took so many notes they could not use in their papers, one was certain he only needed twelve pages of notes for a seven page, typewritten paper. Thus, his own classmates convinced him, albeit indirectly through my discussion of their comments, that he would take many more notes than he would need. Again, the journals were valuable largely in that they induced me to become a better teacher since questions arose in them that I could answer but not anticipate. The journals gave the students a less inhibiting way of helping me to help them.

There were some curiosities (i.e., results that were not necessarily good or bad) the journals turned up. For one, students who had been relatively poor writers produced journal and free writing samples that were at least as good as, and often better than, their prepared and graded compositions. On the other hand there were isolated (perhaps too few to generalize from) examples in some of the better students' journals of mistakes they never made in their regular essays--or in their final term paper. I can only speculate as to why this was. Maybe a grade causes the poor writer to do worse and the good writer to do better, and maybe the lack of one reverses the trend. There have been studies to indicate that a proficient writer is more susceptible to day-to-day fluctuations in quality than an inept one.

Many of the students brought an emotional commitment to their journals which the formality of the research paper discourages. One student writes:

Reading about some of the "medical experiments" that the Germans performed on the concentration camp prisoners is so disgusting that it is hard to believe that any human being could possibly inflict such pain and suffering on another human.

Another says that nuclear war "is kind of sick in the sense of so many innocence lives being wasted." The girl who wrote about Freud and dreams went so far as to change her major. She explained her decision in an imaginary (I assume) letter to her mother. Here is an excerpt from the "letter":

I have decided to change my major to psychology....
My decision came about because of a paper that I am working on now, it is about psych--Freud to be more exact. I've been thinking about it for

a long time, and I have found out that psych is more me, not med. tec. Hope you understand.

It is difficult to determine definitively if the journals actually led to better research papers. The only truly scientific way to test the efficiency of the journal would be to establish a control group: students of equal writing skills to those of the experimental group who were assigned the same research topics but who did not write in journals. Then the two groups could be compared and the results would be reasonably valid. Of course these conditions would be impossible to meet in a Freshman English class. Since many of the journal entries were outpourings of frustration ("I wish the library had no stairs!"), personal self-evaluations ("This [term paper] is...vital to becoming a music ed teacher"), subjective mini book reviews ("A book...I really enjoyed...was Television in the Lives of our Children"), or outpourings of relief ("It's half typed!"), the journals were not inchoate term papers, nor did I expect them to be. Occasionally, however, there would be an indication that the seed for an idea which blossomed in the paper was planted in the journal. In fact, one student wanted a sample of her journal writing (which I had collected) back because it contained a sentence she thought she could not improve. In the sentence she astutely defined "bail" as "the legal compromise between the principle 'innocent until proven guilty' and the protection of the public from unconvicted criminals."⁷ The better students probably gained the most from the journals (despite their previously noted technical lapses) because they wrote more regularly (probably) and more specifically (definitely) than their less conscientious classmates. If the journals made the students practice their writing and think about their papers more than they would have without them, which, on the whole, they probably did, then they were helpful, but in ways impossible to measure.

The students' own opinions of the journals varied greatly. Many students felt the free writing was good but the journals were bad because they imposed too much on their time at a crucial point of the semester. Others wished they were not limited in their journals to writing about their term papers. Some thought the journals were worthwhile but had no effect on their research papers. Three students felt the journals were an excellent idea and they were certain they made their term papers better; one thought they were beneficial because, to her, the difficult part of writing a paper is starting and the journals forced her to start, and two thought they were a total waste of time.

One advantage of term paper journals is that there should be no problem with invention; as long as the student has a topic he has something to write about. Nevertheless, for those times when the mind could think of nothing to start the pen moving, I gave the students the appended list of suggestions. Except for the "dead end" or "frustration" suggestion mentioned earlier, it was apparent many students totally ignored the list, but that was all right. I discovered there were a couple (at most) literalists in the class who do exactly what they are told. Thus, their journals were filled with entries directly inspired by the suggestions. For example, a student who was writing on space shuttles wrote a page-long conversation with Jules Verne, who had evidently predicated the use of space shuttles in his novels. This same student also wrote a hypothetical letter to NASA in Houston suggesting, in rather technical detail, how America could overtake Russia in the space race by further developing its space shuttle system.

A few students actually wrote comparison/contrast essays about sources they had read. I also learned that some students prefer to have structure or guidelines imposed on them. Thus, for the literalists and for the students who would rather not be self-movers, the suggestions are a good idea.

My "stylistic suggestions" were a failure. Except for two cases of footnote practice, no one attempted any of them. I said before that one reason the journal idea attracted me was the potential for encompassing several aspects of composition. This may have also been a reason why my "stylistic suggestions" fell through; perhaps they expected too much. I theorized that if a student wrote a grammatically complete sentence of at least forty words, he would indirectly gain some experience with sentence combining. If he began a sentence with an "ing" or "ly" word, he would indirectly gain some experience with subordination. If he used a dash, semicolon, parentheses, or any uncommon mark of punctuation, he would indirectly gain some experience with style and punctuational nuances. Whatever the reason, the theory behind the suggestions was not converted to practical application; they miscarried.

I was encouraged enough by the overall results of the unit to try it again in the future, but I would make some changes in implementation. First, I would introduce journal writing on any subject at the beginning of the semester. This would give the students ample time to become more comfortable with this type of uncommonly loose writing practice. Also I would collect the journals more regularly (about every ten days or so) because they are no burden to read and they do not have to be graded. Instead of recommending the students write four sentences each day, I would insist on at least one. Then the students would be much more inclined to write daily which, again, is the chief aim. I noticed in the journals that most students were following a common step-by-step process in their research. Here are a few samples from one student's journal. They were selected from different days and are listed chronologically here.

Choosing a research paper topic is sometimes difficult.

Finding books in the library can be a pain.

I found the best way to take information down is to use note cards.

Outlines I found to be very helpful in writing the paper.

The rules for footnoting are different than the ones in high school.

I hate typing.

Since this student's journal was representative of the class, I would, after the students had already chosen a broad topic for their term papers, organize the term paper journal unit over four weeks, each week encouraging journal entries of the following nature:

1st week --library orientation

2nd week --judiciously selecting from a large body of material,
taking notes

3rd week--organizing the paper, writing up, revising

4th week--bibliographical and footnote form, mechanics,
typing problems.

During the four weeks I would again spend about ten minutes each class on free writing. This four week unit should end about one week before the term papers are due. Then the journals and free writing samples would be returned to the students so they could consult them while writing their papers.

Journals can of course be much more than mere bases for term paper exercises, and their other merits have already received their deserved thought and ink. By combining the creative freedom of journals with the often uncompromising mechanical and organizational demands of the research paper, the ambitious teacher can conceivably create the best of both worlds; he can blend practicality with idealism, skill with art.

Notes

¹Since the guidelines for the journals and the free writing exercise were basically the same, and since both exercises were used in tandem, subsequent references to the journals are meant to apply to the free writing also.

²Examples of or discussions about such experiments are too numerous and too technical to be totally germane here; however, three of the more important studies of spaced versus massed learning are: D.E. Berlyne, "Conditions of Prequestioning and Retention of Meaningful Material," Journal of Educational Psychology, 57 (1966), 128-32; Greenburg, Kendler, and Richman, "Influence of Massed and Distributed Practice on the Development of a Mental Set," Journal of Experimental Psychology, 43 (1952), 21-25; and Sawrey and Telford, "Conditions of Practice and Learning," in Educational Psychology, 4th ed. (Boston: Allyn and Bacon, Inc., 1973), 334-370.

³A Contemporary Rhetoric, 2nd ed. (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Co., 1973), p. 16.

⁴Writing Without Teachers (New York: Oxford Univ. Press, 1973), p. 5.

⁵"An Apology for Poetry," in Critical Theory Since Plato, ed. Hazard Adams (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, Inc., 1971), p. 174. "Ab ovo" means "from the egg," or, in this context, "at the beginning."

⁶In this example, and in those which follow, mistakes in the original entries are left uncorrected.

⁷Incidentally, I checked the source the student was quoting from most often in the section of her term paper in which this sentence appeared. Although there was some general discussion in the source about the rights of the individual versus the rights of society, I was satisfied she has not plagiarized this sentence.

Some suggestions for journal entries if you are strapped for ideas:

1. Hold an imaginary conversation with the author of one of your research sources. Or write anything which requires quotation marks.
2. Write a letter applying for a job in a field related to your term paper topic; use your term paper as the primary reason you feel you are qualified for this job.
3. Write an objective review of an article or chapter from a book that you came across while researching your topic.
4. Write a vicious attack on any such article or chapter (don't worry about being objective).
5. Write high praise about an article or chapter (again, forget about objectivity).
6. Write about how frustrating it is to read an article or book on your subject, take comprehensive notes on it, and discover you can't use it for your paper. (Or write about any dead end or blind alley you have encountered during your research.)
7. Revise any part of a draft of your term paper.
8. Revise any previous journal entry.
9. Compare/Contrast any of the authors you have read on your topic.
10. Using any of the compositional modes we have covered in class (e.g., persuasion, cause & effect, illustration, classification, etc.), write about anything you want as long as it pertains to your topic.

Some stylistic suggestions:

11. Write a few (at least two) short, declarative sentences and then rewrite them for maximum emotional effect.
12. Write at least two sentences beginning with a word that starts with either "ing" or "ly."
13. Write a grammatically complete sentence of at least 40 words (this would meet the requirement for one day's entry).
14. Use a mark of punctuation you don't usually use (e.g., semicolon, dash, colon, parentheses, etc).
15. Practice writing one or two footnotes or bibliographical citations.

Remember, anything goes as long as it relates to your research paper topic in some way. You need not write more than one page per day, but try to write at least four sentences each day. Date your entries, and PLEASE write daily--this is the most important recommendation. It is much better to have

four sentences each day than to wait until the night before and write fifty pages. Be as informal as you like. The journals will in no way affect your grade, I promise, unless you turn nothing in. Experiment, be risky, be creative, and above all, be yourself.

University of Delaware

BOOK REVIEWS

Richard Mitchell. Less Than Words Can Say. Boston, Little Brown and Company. 1979.

Richard A. Lanham. Revising Prose. New York: Charles Scribner's Sons. 1979.

With Less Than Words Can Say, Richard Mitchell joins the chorus lamenting the demise of clear and lucid written English. The chorus is a distinguished one, including such speakers (and writers) of the language as Edwin Newman (Strictly Speaking) and Willard J. Espy (O Thou Improper, Thou Uncommon Noun), and Mitchell's voice is clear and penetrating. He calls himself "The Underground Grammarian," an epithet which also serves as the title of his monthly publication displaying and decrying student, faculty, and administrative abuse of English. The book is more than an extended edition of the journal, and Mitchell does not trouble himself much with "correctness" in writing. Dangling modifiers, agreement errors, and pronoun references do not bother him nearly so much as "worms in the brain," "the turkeys that lay golden eggs," "the hydra"--images Mitchell uses to describe the insidiousness of jargon, overspeak, and administrativese. Using too many words and relying on euphemisms, empty phrases, and already meaningless catch words not only pollute but ultimately deaden the brain. The way we use language now is helping us all go to sleep, Mitchell maintains, and he is trying to stay awake.

Less Than Words Can Say is hard-hitting, clever, thought-provoking, and clearly written. Mitchell's argument is not particularly new--inexact, sloppy language certainly reflects and perpetuates inexact, sloppy thinking, and the circle remains unbroken. Mitchell's explanation of the disease and his representations of the symptoms are imaginative and entertaining, but he does not recommend a cure nor envision an end to the epidemic, and so the book is ultimately only a diatribe. We would all like to stay awake, as Mitchell warns us that we must, but he does not quite tell us how to do so.

Unlike Less Than Words Can Say, Revising Prose is marketed as a textbook. Like Mitchell, Lanham inveighs against "America's epidemic verbal ineptitude," lacing his directives, examples from student writing, and short exercises

with generally scathing commentary on the unintelligible prose which surrounds us. He blames poor writing on the schools' "failure to teach functional literacy" and on students' propensity to imitate what he calls "The Official Style." Ignorance is one thing, Lanham maintains, and style is another; his book addresses the latter. "Revising Prose" tries to make you self-conscious about what The Official Style is. [It] comes in several dialects, bureaucratic, social-scientific, computer-engineering-military, but all exhibit the same basic attributes . . . a dominance of nouns and an atrophy of verbs, the triumph of stasis over action."

It is the same kind of writing that enrages Mitchell, but Lanham does have an emergency cure, a "Paramedic Method" for transforming lifeless prose into something intelligible and even pleasurable to read. Lanham spends a good deal of time "consciousness raising"--providing numerous examples of bad writing, bad writing made somewhat better, and bad writing made into good writing. He talks about variety of sentence length and structure, diction, rhythm, and other stylistic problems that teachers often recognize in student writing but don't know how to correct. For Lanham, revising (his Paramedic Method) is an eight-step process:

1. Circle the prepositions.
2. Circle the "is" forms.
3. Ask "Who is kicking who?"
4. Put this "kicking" action in a simple (not compound) active verb.
5. Start fast--no mindless introductions.
6. Write out each sentence on a blank sheet of paper and mark off its basic rhythms with a /.
7. Mark off sentence lengths in the passage with a /.
8. Read the passage aloud with emphasis and feeling.

It is a rational, uncomplicated, and sound approach to rewriting. Lanham does not overload his book with grammatical terminology or rhetorical theory, but he does explain what it means to write plain English. Like Mitchell, he has little to say that is new or striking; unlike Mitchell, he offers solid and useful advice to instructors and to students who want to improve their own writing and the writing around them.

