



# WLA Newsletter

... writing as a liberating activity. ...

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## TEACHING WRITING BY TEACHING WRITING: CONFESSIONS OF AN ADDICT

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Teaching grammar is not teaching writing, and teaching literature is not teaching writing. In the past, because this is what English teachers do best, we have managed to pass these off as teaching writing, and we constructed many arguments which supported us. However, when we raise our eyes from our anthologies we notice that more and more of our students are not learning to write.

Out of desperation as well as inspiration, Baruch College, C.U.N.Y. introduced an interdepartmental courses in Communication Skills for our remedial students. This program, team-taught by members of the Speech, English, and Compensatory Programs Departments, coordinates the related skills of speaking, writing, and reading. Among several benefits of this program was one which we had not foreseen: it freed the English teacher to teach writing. I confess to being a literature junky, and only with great effort was I finally able to make the radical decision to stop teaching literature and start teaching writing in my writing classes.

I used no texts. I had my students write in class, read their writing aloud to each other, and write at home. Then I xeroxed some of the essays, and we discussed them in class. Grammar work came out of student writing. Students kept their own lists of spelling words, verb forms, and idioms. I collected these lists periodically, and I xeroxed exercises for practice taken from them. Nothing went on during my class time that didn't further in a direct way the students' ability to write.

In the beginning, the students in my remedial class shared a negative image of themselves as writers of English. This stemmed partly from the fact that they shared something else too--they were not native speakers of Standard English. They were either lower-class Black, Chinese, or Hispanic students. During the course of the term they began to recognize each other's special problems with English, although some problems were common to all of them. They needed work in organization, using specific evidence and details, logical development of a thesis, and proofreading.

They were all having problems with verb forms, so my assignments at the beginning of the term focused on the use of various tenses. I asked them to deal with the past tense in one assignment: Describe the day you spent yesterday. Then I asked them to deal with the present tense in two assignments: 1) Describe a member of the class, and 2) Describe the park. For the first of these assignments they sat in a circle in the classroom and took notes on one person in the circle. I gave them large yellow pads and told them that they had to fill up one page. The aim was to get down as

many details as possible. Then, at the end of an hour, we talked about ways in which we could organize the description: spatially (head to toe, for example) or by using some abstract organizational pattern (features, clothes, actions.) The assignment was to make some kind of order out of the random notes they had taken and write an essay at home.

For the second assignment we walked to the park a few blocks from school. It's a small park surrounded by huge business buildings, traffic, and many people. I said that they had to try to fill two pages with notes. Then, again, we talked about the problems in organizing such a paper. They could see that there was a problem in the selection of details. I suggested that one organizational device might be to use the device of the senses (sight, sound, smell.) Another would be to use a spatial order.

The next assignment in class was to use the future tense. I gave them paper and said, "Close your eyes and try to picture your life ten years from today. Describe that day." I took a few sample sentences from them to be sure that they knew what the future tense meant, then I let them struggle with it. It took a while getting started, but eventually they began to write. After an hour I asked for volunteers to read aloud what they had written so far. Then members of the class commented on the use of details, the problems incurred in using the future tense, and possible ways to organize the papers. The assignment was to go home and rewrite the papers. Each paper that was written at home was xeroxed and discussed in class sessions. These assignments forced the students to look around them, use specific details and organize a mass of material. In addition, the assignments structured the students into specific uses of verb forms.

The workshop format allowed for a diversity of assignments and responses. After the descriptive assignments I moved into more analytical ones. I made television assignments such as "The Execution of Private Slovic," "The Mystery of the Maya," "Antigone," and "Alvin Ailey: Visions and Memories." In each class we discussed the program, briefly, so that they could exchange ideas and "get into" the material. Then I gave them some topics which came out of the discussion and asked them to begin writing.

During the semester, the atmosphere in the class became relaxed and serious. Students treated each other's writing with respect but, increasingly, they became better critics of each other's writing. The first time that I xeroxed an essay the students were reluctant to write comments and corrections on it. That reluctance disappeared as the term went on. They began to lose their fear of "tinkering" with writing and learned something of the process of revision. Pencils began to work rapidly, if not always correctly. Of course, they knew that it was easier to find someone else's error--even when it was the same error that they themselves made. They learned enough about each other's writing to know what kinds of errors the author tended to make; therefore, they began to look for certain things as they started each paper. Later there began to be some carry-over to their own first drafts when they proofread.

One advantage of this approach to the teaching of writing is that my students seemed to fear writing less than they did when they entered my class, and some of the grammatical problems lessened. They did not spend the semester learning how to fill in boxes in a grammar workbook and, for better or worse, they didn't waltz with me through psychological approaches to literature.

I'd like to think that Frost was wrong when he wrote of choices not made:

Oh! I kept the first for another day!  
Yet knowing how way leads on to way,  
I doubted if I should ever come back.

My students may not ever read the literature that they would have read in my class, but I made a choice. I believe that the most efficient way to teach students to write is by letting them write, rewrite and write again. Could I dare ignore literature if I were not team-teaching a Freshman English course? Yes. For our new urban college population, unfamiliar and uncomfortable with Standard English, our prior goals for Freshman English are no longer attainable--if they ever were. We are trying to do too much in too short a time, and we are failing. Some course may have to rely on encouraging students to take literature courses as electives. Freshman English must now be a writing course, and we must make it less threatening and more productive than it has been in the past. Addictions are hard to control, but it is time for us to give up our addiction to literature and try to get our students hooked on writing.

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### THE VALUE OF WRITING

Richard Gebhardt  
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Not infrequently, English teachers are asked to justify writing. Maybe a student who is failing snaps defensively, "What good is all this crap anyway?" Maybe a teacher of math, history, or some other field asks, "Why are you doing all that creative writing when the students can't even spell?" Or maybe a successful student--or an administrator or parent--asks just what your term papers and autobiographical assignments have to do with helping students get good jobs. I have had to justify the ways to comp to people asking all of these questions, and I imagine that you have too.

This past summer, members of the English Faculty at Findlay College decided to approach such questions directly. William Wagner, Robert Ewald, Robert Rennert and I were planning the college's new freshman writing course, "Exposition and Exploration." We knew from past experience that many students and some parents and faculty members might question the course from their "practical," vocational perspectives. So, after much discussion, we formulated a statement in which we tried to explain some of the values that writing--and effective writing classes--can have for the intellectual, personal, and vocational lives of students.

#### "Common Principles of Exposition and Exploration"\*

#### 1. Good writing develops habits of creative, organized, and critical thinking.

Writing involves bringing together material from various sources--research, daily life, personal feelings, etc.--and synthesizing it into new forms. Thus writing is essentially creative, and practicing writing consciously under the conditions of an effective writing course develops habits that are valuable any place people must examine diverse material, explore relationships between ideas, or develop new insights.

Writing provides a means of organizing ideas visibly, and so of letting people clarify the rambling ideas that flow through their minds

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\*The following five points are reprinted from Writing at Findlay College: A Guide for Students and Advisors. Copyright 1975, Findlay College Division of Humanities.

on any given topic. Writing lets us bring up "from our tumbling mists of thought and intuition. . . those concepts we hardly knew we had. On blank paper . . . we can hold these thoughts still, straighten them out, test them out."<sup>1</sup> This clarifying and organizing of ideas that writing develops is a valuable ability wherever people confront complex issues or try to explain ideas to others.

Writing requires that people develop critical perspectives on their own ideas and on their means of communicating their ideas to others. In learning--whether in college or on the job--the personal critical perspective is essential, since it points to areas that need improvement and so provides motivation to learn. "Criticism indicates the need for improvement and if we must depend on others to provide our cues, self-improvement will be slow, if not difficult." And so, it is "vital to help students from their own standards and get into the habit of gauging their productions against these personal standards."<sup>2</sup> This development of standards, this self-criticism, is what an effective writing course develops in students. And such critical application of standards is important in any area in which quality and progress are more important than complacency and the status quo.

2. Good writing must have both subjective and objective dimensions.

Without a sense of personality breathing through it--without indications that the writer cares about the subject and has a personal point of view toward it--writing is lifeless, colorless, unpersuasive. Without a concern for the world outside of the writer, writing can become a subjective trap in which writers are unable to get beyond themselves "into rational thought, into ideas, into the truths and truth about this mysterious and wonderful and perhaps frightening life and universe of which we are a part."<sup>3</sup>

So an effective writing course should emphasize both the subjective and objective dimensions of writing. It should help students infuse their attitudes and personal reactions into writing, even as they consider the broad consequences of their subjects, the audience for which they write, the conventions of language in which they write. And it should help students avoid getting trapped in their own subjective concerns, even as they develop their perspectives and achieve greater self-awareness through the process of writing.

3. Good writing is the result of using a comprehensive, reliable writing process.

While some people may write well "off the top of their heads," pouring out effective essays while "inspired," most writers are not so lucky. Further, the artificial limitations imposed by the college term make it impractical or disastrous to wait passively for inspiration to strike. Most writers in a college setting, like those facing various deadlines in an occupational setting, need to approach writing more systematically by consciously using an effective writing process.

So an effective writing course should emphasize the importance of using a comprehensive, reliable writing process including such steps as: locating a subject, generating details, finding an attitude toward the subject, selecting appropriate approaches from among the different types of writing,

defining an audience, revising for greater clarity and impact, and proofreading for accuracy and neatness. And the course should help students find a systematic writing process that works for them.

4. Good writing requires that a person be an effective reader and editor of his/her own writing.

Generally, "good" writing is distinguished from less successful writing by the revision stage of the writing process--by discovering and then clarifying the confusing organization, by strengthening the unsupported generalization with additional evidence, by correcting problems of usage and punctuation, etc. Often the student writer comes to rely on the teacher to discover writing problems and to suggest ways to revise them. But the student "will not have the writing teacher at his side throughout his career to point out the problems which need to be solved on a page. He must be able to read his own writing with a cold, critical eye and to diagnose his own problems."<sup>4</sup> So an effective writing course should emphasize the importance of becoming one's own editor. It should help students realize that to be successful in future writing situations, they must be able to read their writing critically, to locate areas that need improvement, and to revise these areas to make them more effective. And the course should help students develop the critical perspective and the editing tools they will need to write effectively when they do not have a teacher-editor to help them.

5. Good writing is a valuable skill in many vocations.

People in business write letters, memos, reports. Teachers of every subject and in every grade write letters to parents, recommendations for students, publicity releases for school activities. Clergymen write sermons, monthly church newsletters, directions to subordinates on their staffs. Scientists write reports, articles on the findings of research, proposals for federal grants. Yes, many vocations place a high degree of emphasis on the ability to write clearly and accurately. And employers may well select and promote (or not select and not promote) employees because of the way they write.

One extensive survey of personnel managers, for instance, found that ability "to handle paperwork with accuracy, conciseness, and clarity" is a "skill that most companies expect of every employee who is placed in a position of responsibility." As the personnel director of a major insurance company put it, "One of the chief weaknesses of many college graduates is the inability to express themselves well. Even though technically qualified, they will not advance far with such a handicap."<sup>5</sup> And in the letters of forty-three corporation chief executives and personnel managers, another researcher found solid agreement that the "inability to inform and/or move others with words is preventing otherwise qualified employees from rising to . . . middle and upper management."<sup>6</sup>

<sup>1</sup>Sheridan Baker, "Writing as Discovery," ADE Bulletin, No. 43, November 1974, p. 34.

<sup>2</sup>Eileen Wagner, "How to Avoid Grading Compositions," English Journal, 64 (March 1975), 78.

<sup>3</sup>Baker, p. 36.

<sup>4</sup>Donald M. Murray, A Writer Teaches Writing (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1968), p. 131.

<sup>5</sup>Linwood E. Orange, English: The Pre-Professional Major, 2nd ed. (New York: Modern Language Association, 1973), p. 10.

<sup>6</sup>N. Alex Stedman, III, "Composition Finds an Ally in Industry," College Composition and Communication, 26 (May 1975), 197.

TEACHING WRITING BY TEACHING WRITING:  
SOME FURTHER THOUGHTS

"Teaching grammar is not teaching writing, and teaching literature is not teaching writing," writes Marie Jean Lederman in the lead article in this issue. Her point is important for college and high school writing teachers, since it suggests a proper ordering of priorities for writing classes. As the NCTE Commission on Composition puts it, "Learning to write requires writing; writing practice should be a major emphasis of the course. Workbook exercises, drill on usage, and analysis of existing prose are not adequate substitutes for writing" ("Teaching Composition: A Position Statement," College English, Oct. 1974, p. 219).

This does not mean that specific study of usage and grammar has no place in the writing class, but only that such exercises should be supporting activities to the actual subject of the course--writing. Lederman comments that grammar work should come out of student writing. This approach would guarantee that students would not be bored by being forced to study writing problems that do not apply to them; and it would increase student motivation to conquer those writing problems that they actually have. This approach would allow the student to learn in a healthy trial-and-error fashion--"The student simply plunges into the assignment, uses all his resources, makes errors where he must, and heeds the feedback"--rather than the confusing and frustrating error-avoidance fashion--"The learner is put in the situation of trying to understand and keep in mind all this advice when he should be thinking about the needs of the subject" (James Moffett, Teaching the Universe of Discourse, Houghton Mifflin, 1969, pp. 199 and 201).

The problem with teaching writing by teaching writing, of course, is that it is laborious and time-consuming. It is not as efficient as teaching "rules" and testing the identification of usage problems in quiz sentences; it is just not as stimulating as discussions of Shakespeare or Kafka. In his study of American Education, Charles Silberman found that most high school teachers do not have adequate time to teach writing well. "The average high school English teacher meets with 150 students a week; to spend just ten minutes a week reading and correcting each student's papers would consume twenty-five hours. Not surprisingly, therefore, composition and writing receive relatively little attention, accounting for about 15% of classroom time" (Crisis in the Classroom, Vintage Books, 1971, p. 176). Such conditions make discussion of literature much more attractive than the grading of weekly or daily papers; they make programmed reviews of grammar and usage much more desirable than an emphasis on revision.

But beyond such conditions, the decision not to teach writing as the main subject of a writing class probably grows from an inaccurate assumption--the masochistic belief that the teacher must criticize and grade all student compositions. Donald Murray characterizes the typical English teacher as "the faculty martyr. He lugs home, night after night, a cross of papers, all of which he believes have to be marked in red, the symbol of his blood" (A Writer Teaches Writing, Houghton Mifflin, 1969, p. 105). But while many teachers share this belief that they need to read and mark and grade all student papers, few if any of them can grade 150 papers a week--week after week. So they reduce the number of papers to be written to match their ability to grade. The fallacy here is that, during the time that a teacher may have to read 150 papers, each student only has to write one. Students, that is, could have the number of papers increased, if ways could be found to augment teacher-grading of papers.

One way to do this is to have students read and comment on each other's papers during cooperative "writing workshop" sessions. Using this collaborative approach, students can write more papers and receive constructive reader-responses to their

writing, even though the teacher does not grade all their papers. Granted, such student collaboration in the writing class requires some special guidance by the teacher--to prevent students from concentrating too exclusively on spelling and punctuation, for example, and to help them focus their feedback on ideas, organization, and development. But as many articles and books suggest (see the following Reading List for a sample of these materials), collaborative writing approaches help students develop a surer sense of their audience, greater skill in communicating ideas clearly and convincingly, and greater ability to read their own writing with a sharp editor's eye. And they do this without forcing the teacher to endanger eyesight and health by grading every paper.

WIA Reading List #3

COLLABORATIVE WRITING

- Ralph Bellas, "Workshop Sessions in English Composition," College Composition and Communication, 21 (Oct. 1970), 271-274.
- Kenneth Brufee, "Collaborative Learning: Some Practical Models," College English, 34 (Feb. 1973), 634-643.
- Jill Cohn, "Response to Writing," Writing: The Personal Voice (New York: Harcourt, 1975), pp. 13-32.
- Neil Ellman, "Peer Evaluation and Peer Grading," English Journal, 64 (March 1975), 79-80.
- Alfred Gorman, "Aggregates and Groups," and "Interaction Exercises," Teachers and Learners, 2nd ed. (Boston: Allyn Bacon, 1974), pp. 3-8, and 95-159.
- Mary Greer and Bonnie Rubinstein, eds., "The Community of the Classroom," "The Group as a Way of Exploring Ideas," and "The Group as a Way of Exploring Feeling," Will the Real Teacher Please Stand Up? (Pacific Palisades, CA: Goodyear, 1972), pp. 121-172.
- Francine Hardaway, "What Students Can do to Take the Burden off You," College English, 36 (Jan. 1975), 577-580.
- Regina Hoover, "Experiments in Peer Teaching," College Composition and Communication, 23 (Dec. 1972), 421-425.
- David Karrfalt, "Writing Teams," College Composition and Communication, 23 (Dec. 1971), 377-378.
- Julie Klein, "The Small Group Approach to Writing," Measure for Measure: Classroom Practices in Teaching English, 1972-1973, ed. Allen Berger and Blanche Smith (Urbana: NCTE, 1972), pp. 32-36.
- John McNamara, "Teaching the Process of Writing," College English, College English, 34 (Feb. 1973), 661-665.
- James Moffett, "Learning to Write by Writing," Teaching the Universe of Discourse, (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1968), pp. 188-210.
- Donald Murray, "The Writer Senses and Audience," "The Classroom: A Writing Laboratory," and "How to Teach the Student to Teach Himself," A Writer Teaches Writing (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1968), pp. 3-5, 42, 109-110, and 129-33.
- Wilson Snipes, "An Inquiry: Peer Group Teaching in Freshman Writing," College Composition and Communication, (May 1971), 169-176.
- Eileen Wagner, "How to Avoid Grading Composition," English Journal, 64 (March 1975), 76-79.
- Alvin Zander, "Productivity and Group Success: Team Spirit vs. the Individual Achiever," Psychology Today, Nov. 1974, pp. 65-68.

CONFERENCE FOR HIGH-SCHOOL  
AND COLLEGE WRITING TEACHERS

High school and college writing teachers are allies. Both teach writing, often to students who do not immediately grasp the importance of the subject and under conditions which make the job difficult. College teachers receive the products of high school writing classes in their composition courses. Many high school writing teachers see their job as helping students do well in those courses when they go to college. And teachers at both levels have insights and strategies to share with each other.

For such reasons as these, sessions on "Writing: The Mutual Concern" will be included on the program of the second annual Conference for Humanities Educators to be held at Findlay College, 2-3 April 1976.

If you have suggestions about topics or panelists for these sessions--if your school has a program or a set of problems that would be of interest to others, if you or someone you know uses particularly interesting strategies in writing classes--please write. If you would like to be on the mailing list for later publicity about the conference, please send your address. Contact: Richard Gebhardt, Humanities Chairperson, Findlay College, Findlay, OH 45840.

and would like your name kept on file for occasional mailings, just send a note with your full address. If you want to be sure you receive every issue published this year, send \$1 to WIA Newsletter, c/o Richard Gebhardt, Findlay College, Findlay, OH 45840.

WIA Newsletter is edited by Dr. Richard Gebhardt of Findlay College, and by Dr. Barbara G. Smith, Assistant Coordinator of Special Projects of the Kentucky Council on Public Higher Education.

WIA Newsletter began in a workshop on "Writing as a Liberating Activity" at the 1973 NCTE College Section Meeting. Its editorial policy continues the concerns of that workshop:

-The role of writing classes in freeing student imagination and creativity.

-Ways that writing teachers can expand the range of student outlook and opinion

-Ways that teachers can expand the range of instructional options open to them.

WIA Newsletter invites you to submit brief articles, reports, reviews, and reading lists. Submissions should grow out of a teacher's experiences in high school or college writing classes, and they should relate to one of the three elements of the newsletter's editorial policy. WIA Newsletter is especially interested in receiving "Teaching Plans"--one-two page outlines of how a teacher approached a specific teaching task or organized a unit of a writing course.

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