



WLA Newsletter

. . .writing as a liberating activity. . .

A MIDDLE GRADE SAMPLER

FINDLAY COLLEGE

USAGE AND ABUSAGE:

TEACHING GRAMMAR WITHOUT TEXTBOOKS (PART I)

Marie Jean Lederman
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Like all teachers of writing, I have strong biases about the teaching of grammar. Bias number one: I teach grammar. Bias number two: I believe that the notion that students must somehow "learn grammar" before they begin writing is false; therefore, students in all my writing classes, remedial and non-remedial, write essays all term. Bias number three: I do not use grammar texts. Grammar texts are de-codable primarily by those who already know how to speak and write Standard English. They confuse "trick" questions on minor points of grammar with those real mistakes that our students do make, obliterating the line between what is very important in Standard Written English and what is less important. My main objection to grammar texts is that they utilize "canned writing"--similar to the use of "canned laughter" on television. I have the same objections to dead writing as I do to dead laughter. This leads to bias number four: I only use material written by students in that particular class to teach grammar. This writing is not "canned"; it is very much alive, having been written, generally, within the previous week or two.

I teach not only "grammar" but every aspect of writing from student writing. This makes my teaching of grammar an integral part of my teaching of writing. I make a conscious effort not to separate the teaching of grammar from the rest of what goes on in my writing classes, either by using special texts for it or by devoting special units during the term to it, or separate periods during the week. The teaching of grammar and the teaching of good writing are not separable activities, and using separate time periods and separate texts to "teach grammar" helps reinforce the notion, already firmly planted in our students' heads, that they are separable.

What I am describing is simply an alternative way of dealing with grammar in our students' writing--a way of teaching grammar without using grammar texts. Let me be specific. I am going to discuss the use of this method with one of my remedial writing classes at City University of New York.

WANTED:

SHORT ARTICLES FOR GRAMMAR FORUM

Issue Ten will continue WLA's focus on grammar in writing classes. "Usage and Abusage (Part II)" will examine benefits of teaching grammar without texts. And--if you want one--there will be a Readers' Forum on Grammar.

How do you respond to Lederman's approach? Are there specific ideas in the article that appeal to you or that appall you? Can you see ways that the approach could be adapted to fit your classes--or reasons why it could not? If you have a reaction and would like to be part of the Forum, send a response article under 500 words to Richard Gebhardt, English Department, Findlay College, Findlay, OH 45840.

My first assignment was an in-class essay on any topic. After I had read these papers at home, I sat down at my typewriter and picked out sentences which contained miscellaneous errors in Standard English. I made an effort to get sentences from each of my students' papers and to get at least one kind of each error which they, as a class, were making. I typed the sentences exactly as they appeared in the students' papers, except for spelling errors; I try not to reinforce incorrect spelling by copying misspelled words on these tear sheets.

When we met for the next class I returned the papers and distributed this sheet. I asked the students to take the sheet home and try to make corrections on any sentences which they thought were incorrect. If they couldn't see the error, of course they would leave the sentence alone. In addition to this assignment, I gave them their next writing assignment. We had read a New York Times article dealing with the sudden advent of three television shows which had heroes/heroines who were both ethnic and single. Their assignment was to watch one of these three programs and to write an essay discussing the reality or unreality of the program as each of them perceived it.

The next time we met we went over the first tear sheet containing sentences with errors from their first writing assignment. This allowed me to begin to get some idea of what kinds of errors my students were capable of picking up and correcting and what kinds of errors confused them. This gave me my direction for future teaching. I collected the essay on the reality or unreality of the television program. In addition to making comments on each paper, I decided to pick out two kinds of sentences for use in class: run-on sentences and sentences which contained subject-verb agreement errors.

Meanwhile, their next writing assignment was to compare and contrast two characters from two of these ethnic/single television programs. This assignment was given on a day when we talked about ways of setting up a comparison-contrast paper. When I read this set of essays I saw that some students were still confused about the use of the semicolon to divide run-on sentences. I duplicated a list of their sentences which contained this error. I also decided to use some of their paragraphs from this assignment to work with on topic sentences and paragraph development.

As the start of this one term suggests, I try to vary my procedures with these tear sheets. Students always take the sheets home first and so have time to make corrections. I spot-check in class to see who has made corrections and who hasn't. After we finish working with a sheet together, I sometimes ask a student to go up to the board and write a sentence of his or her own, unpunctuated or with whatever errors we've just been discussing. Then I ask another student to go up to the board and correct it.

For additional feedback, I sometimes duplicate representative sentences from our sheets and ask students to correct these in class. This serves as a kind of quiz. Although I don't give the students grades, I do, again, get some idea of who is noticing errors and who isn't. I don't grade the tear sheets because, ultimately, I'm not interested in whether or not students can make corrections on isolated pieces of paper. The real feedback comes from their essays. When a student who has been making a certain kind of error stops making that error, I have my feedback. If the student continues to make the error, I know that I need to work with the student individually in conference. After the conference, my assignment to the student is to go home and write a paragraph including some sentences which illustrate that the student has understood what we have just done.

Sometimes I divide the class into small groups of students who are making a particular kind of error; I assign a group leader who doesn't make this error and let him or her work with the group. I distribute appropriate tear sheets to each group, and make myself a resource person to each group. Again, the feedback is to have the students create sentences which are correct and which embody the rule that they have worked on during that period. [Part II will appear in WLA, Issue Ten.]

FOCUS: GRAMMAR AND WRITING INSTRUCTION

The approach of Marie Jean Lederman's "Teaching Grammar Without Textbooks" contrasts with the picture of grammar overkill in one city that Issue Eight contained. And Issue Ten will continue to focus on the place of grammar in writing classes. In the spirit of this special focus, Issue Nine contains a series of brief--and often conflicting--quotations intended to provoke thought about a subject of great importance.

Teaching Tip #6: "A Focus and Support Exercise"

Contributor: Richard Gebhardt, Findlay College

Background: Galloping generalization is one of the most persistent problems I face in writing classes. One-sentence paragraphs, strings of assertions substituted for genuine supporting material, papers made up almost completely of abstract words--such things show up frequently in writing by students of all abilities and motivations. When I have attacked generalizations with pleas for supporting details, I have been buried in bloated paragraphs with multiple unsupported topics. When I have begged for paragraphs with a single focus, I have been rewarded with choppy pages of two-line paragraphs.

Obviously, I concluded one term, I needed to attack both problems at once. But first I had to find a way to make students see--really--how lack of focus and lack of specific support can interfere with clear communication. To do this, I decided to rely on the standard technique of using examples drawn for the class itself.

Phase One: As I read a set of papers early one term, I made it a point to locate a paragraph with severe and obvious problems in focus and support. I used this student paragraph as the basis for the worksheet I took to class the next day.

Focus and Support Worksheet: Part I

Directions: There are many ways of looking at any topic. The specific way you "look" at your subject in a paragraph will determine the focus (or emphasis) of the paragraph. And the focus will help you select supporting material for the paragraph. To practice these principles of focus and support, do some "rapid writing"/the term I use for free writing in my classes/ about these six different focuses on the same topic:

1. My room is familiar to me.
2. In my room, everything is at my fingertips.
3. Things in my room bring back memories.
4. I can go to my room to be alone.
5. I can go to my room to relax.
6. I feel at home in my room.

Take sentence one and jot down ten specific details that you could use to develop a paragraph about your room. Then write a paragraph using as many of those details as you can. Then move on to sentence two, and so on.

Phase Two: Part I of the worksheet was intended to show students how they could write paragraphs with limited focuses. It also was a deliberately misleading--a magician would call it misdirection--set-up for the lesson that multiple unsupported focuses make writing vague and ineffective. So after students had finished Part I, I gave them the "punchline" to the whole exercise.

Focus and Support Worksheet: Part II

Here is the punchline to the little exercise in Part I. The six sentences, as you have seen, can serve as the topic sentences of different paragraphs. (They could also work as the overall main points of several different papers.) By looking at the underlined sections, you sense different focuses; by collecting details stimulated by these different focuses, you generate the material for support in several paragraphs. But what would happen if you used all of these sentences in one paragraph--so that no focus was supported and the paragraph split the reader's attention among six different points?

This is not a hypothetical question, but a practical one. You can see the answer in the student paragraph from which I took the six sentences in Part I.

One place that I love is my dorm room. The reason for this is because it is so familiar to me. I have most of my possessions here with me and they are at my fingertips anytime I need them. The little statues and my many books on the shelves bring back nice memories. My room is a place where I can go to be alone or to relax when I'm tired. I feel at home here.

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Interconnections*
A MIDDLE-GRADE TEACHER
READS A COLLEGE TEXT

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As a junior high teacher, I habitually peruse a variety of materials from comic books to college texts for teaching of writing ideas. One college text that was useful and pleasant to read was Writing: The Personal Voice (Harcourt, 1975) by Jill Wilson Cohn. Although written for college freshmen, classroom teachers will find Mrs. Cohn's ideas adaptable to the classroom.

Mrs. Cohn's approach is personal. The reader often has the feeling of being involved in a conversation about writing with a friendly person of experience. She is interested in the "personness" of the students. Mrs. Cohn says, "This book is written to help you to explore some ideas about the process of writing, about yourselves, and about the uses of language. I hope you will discover, through your own writing and the writing of others, that composition is not merely a fixed pattern of words arranged on a page according to specific rules." Her method in writing the book is true to the philosophy that she states. For example, she didn't alter examples of student writing to conform to her own standards; in fact, she did not edit student writings at all. As a result, the examples sometimes skip from first to third person or show other problems of style or usage. Still, teachers who are frustrated because they can't teach all the rules of grammar will be comforted by a college teacher who "ignores grammar, usage and writing conventions" on her students' papers.

Mrs. Cohn's personal approach also show itself in the Piagetian philosophy behind the contents of the book's chapters: Self Encounter, Place, Others, Autobiography, Larger Institutions, Criticism, and Fiction. If Mrs. Cohn is using Piaget's idea of moving from self to outside, she may have placed the chapter on autobiography in the wrong order; logically, autobiography seems to follow self-encounter.

An idea-seeking teacher may be interested in the dozen or so "Specific Writing Possibilities" found at the end of each chapter. Most of the ideas in these sections are easily adapted to junior high and high school classes. For example, the assignment to "Identify a strong emotion or prejudice you have; then relate a particular incident that you feel caused it or contributed to it," is no less applicable to ninth graders than it is to college freshmen.

In Writing: The Personal Voice, Jill Cohn fulfills her stated function of exploring, experimenting, and responding. Sharing in this process is beneficial to the junior high school teacher who is looking for useful materials and approaches to use the English class. Furthermore, knowing how the college teacher does it helps the secondary teacher evaluate his or her own teaching approaches.

*"Interconnections" is a new section of WLA which explores common concerns that connect writing instruction in elementary school, middle-school, high school, and college. In this issue, a junior high teacher reviews a college writing text; future issues might contain pieces on how applicable elementary language arts activities are to the college teacher, or what a high school teacher thinks of some current hot issue among college teachers. Short articles examining the materials or approaches of one level of writing instruction from the perspective of another level are welcome.

WLA Newsletter

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. . . writing as a liberating activity. . .

About WLA Newsletter

The WLA NEWSLETTER began in a workshop on "Writing as a Liberating Activity" at the 1973 NCTE College Section meeting--a workshop emphasizing the role of writing classes in freeing student imagination, broadening student outlook and opinion, and increasing the instructional options of teachers.

Key Editorial Concerns of WLA:

- The role of writing classes in freeing student imagination and creativity.
- Ways that teachers can expand the range of instructional options open to them.
- The essential compatibility of imagination and discipline--of creativity and craftsmanship--in good writing and in good writing instruction.

Submissions Invited

WLA NEWSLETTER invites college, high school, and middle grades teachers to submit brief articles that relate to one or more of the key editorial concerns and that grow out of practical experiences in writing classes. The WLA format demands that articles be short (usually less than 6 double-spaced pages), that they contain a minimum of quoted material, and that they include documentation parenthetically within the text of the article.

Submissions for these more-or-less regular departments are especially welcome:

Teaching Tips--Two-three page outlines of how a teacher approaches a specific task or organizes a unit of a writing class.

Interconnections--Brief articles or reviews in which materials or approaches of one level of writing instruction (college, high school, middle grades, elementary) are examined from the perspective of a different level.

Reading Lists--Brief lists (preferably annotated) recommending interesting, informative reading on a subject (e.g. creativity, collaborative writing, values clarification, grading alternatives) likely to interest WLA readers.

From the WLA Position Statement

"Writing is a creative act which by its very nature explores relationships between disparate materials and uses language to give new forms to the relationships."

"Writing is a means for one human being to communicate . . . to other human beings, and so a writer must be aware of the clarity of his/her writing for others, recognizing that choices in language, structure, and usage will have a direct influence on the effectiveness of his/her writing." (Excerpted from Issue Two.)

"Liberation" Does Not Mean "License"

". . . the discipline of writing is fundamental to the concept of Writing as a Liberating Activity. . . The WLA approach values writing that is spontaneous, genuine, and original, but it also values writing that is thoughtful, consistent, and clear. The WLA approach sees that the discipline of writing is a tool through which students can expand their opinions, increase their sensitivity to language, broaden their expository, fictional, and poetic powers--and in short liberate themselves and the linguistic resources within themselves." (From Richard Gebhardt and Barbara G. Smith, "'Liberation' Is Not 'License,'" College Composition and Communication, Feb. 1976.)

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