

Effective Writing Assignments and Classroom Exercises

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No teacher works very long at the teaching of writing without understanding the vital importance of convincing students that the activity can be profitable for them. But no teacher who has tried to do this can fail to have noticed that traditional ways of defining writing or describing its benefits are likely to have very little appeal. It is no longer possible for us to get very far as teachers by offering writing to our students as a predominately mechanical activity whose importance we assert with the half-truths of negative arguments: If you *don't* write well you will not be thought well-mannered (rounded, educated, etc.); if you *don't* write well then you will not obtain a high-paying job or be successful. Simply to write sentences, all of them for someone else, with no more consciousness than this of what the activity can involve or of how it can be important, is as meaningless as it is boring; and it is hard to imagine how anyone who understands the activity of writing only in such terms could care very much about writing at all, let alone whether she gets any better at it.

But for teachers to understand and present writing as a uniquely powerful instrument for learning, as a special way of thinking and coming to know, is to be able to suggest to students that the ability to compose may be seen as the ability to conceptualize, to build structures, to draw inferences, to develop implications, to generalize intelligently — in short to make connections, to work out relationships — between this idea and that idea, words and other words, sentences and other sentences, language and experience. To teach that writing is as important for what it is as for what it is about — that it is a form of language experience which all of us can use to run order through chaos, thereby giving ourselves a part of the identities we have — is to provide

students with a way of seeing how the activity of writing can have something in it for a *writer* even when the writer does not find the activity enjoyable, even when the writer does not intend to make writing an essential part of his or her life. Writing offered as a form of language using that can enable writers to become better composers, better conceptualizers, and better thinkers, is writing that becomes an activity with meaning for students.

Our purpose in working together will be to explore some strategies for devising the kinds of writing assignments and class exercises that can move students beyond conventional ways of seeing and writing, that can put them in the position of seeing how language using is important, and what good writing as a form of good language using is good for. We will begin with a comparison of some highly traditional writing topics (Why Go To College? Write a Description of Someone You Admire) with the kinds of better writing assignments that teachers can create from them. From this we will move to consider some ways that teachers can develop materials which will enable students to better understand themselves as people whose experience is arranged and defined by the language they use to shape it. How all of us know (and do not know) such a simple mechanism as the telephone dial can serve to illustrate this. Finally, we will look at various ways of using student writing as a basis for different kinds of writing assignments and class exercises. We will discuss how to use such assignments individually, and also how to extend them in a sequence that can guide students to increasingly complex ways of thinking about writing at the same time that it can structure a composition course from beginning to end.

