

Write Write

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Teachers who have participated in in-service seminars conducted by the ECB in schools throughout Michigan have often expressed their desire for materials which appropriately describe **writing as a process**. Although instructional materials about writing abound, such materials usually do not portray writing as a process; instead, they approach writing as an activity in which students create "correct" forms out of script that somehow already exists. These instructional materials — both printed and visual — teach students that good writing is an exercise in "correcting," not composing. In reality, however, teachers note that effective writing begins with students' desire to communicate their ideas. Rules for improving or correcting writing become useful at the final stages of writing — the stages when students are editing and proofreading their texts. While rules governing "correct" forms in writing are important, they are only one of many parts of the process of composition.

Many teachers having asked me for information about materials which demonstrate the composing as well as the correcting processes of writing, I applied to the Fund for the Improvement of Postsecondary Education (FIPSE) for a grant to produce an animated film entitled *Write Write*, a film that would illustrate the process in which writers engage as they compose for a purpose which is important to them.

Why use film to help students learn about Writing?

First, reports of some teachers who have studied student writers had led me to believe that students need to see why some composing behaviors are effective and others are not effective. Similarly, if student writers are able to see images of successful writers composing, students might have models of behavior to emulate. If student writers are able to see unsuccessful writers stuck in their tracks they might be able to identify how they got into their difficulties. Vivid examples of what makes writing work in specific situations and what sends it awry in other situations can be powerful tools for teaching. Because it establishes both sequence and situation as it presents content, film is a natural medium for providing illustrations of how both successful and unsuccessful composing processes unfold.

A second reason for the use of visual media to teach good composing strategies is based on recent research into the effects of television on viewers' systems of processing information: viewers tend to process photography, film, and television as if it were lifelike. Research conducted by Gerbner (1977) indicates that visual media exert a powerful influence upon viewers' beliefs about events. In fact, Gerbner shows that televised accounts of events have a greater impact on beliefs than do either personal experience or non-cinematic sources of knowledge. Perhaps film, unlike



Write Write in production: Tom Bray, Barbra Morris, Susan Le Van

any other medium, can persuade students to think again about their own composing strategies and to rethink questions of reader expectations as well. Film can construct a complete communication situation for the viewer: the writer, the text, and the reader can come alive individually and in relationship to one another.

Write Write was designed to emphasize some of the challenges writers must face: not only how they must order their composing tasks during writing, but also how they can identify the expectations readers bring to their writing. In *Write Write*, an imaginary family of line people live on a gourmet word farm on the island of Here. They must communicate with the world of There, inhabited by clay blocks who use computers to solve their daily problems. When a freak snow storm paralyzes the island of the Line People, they compose a letter. Elaborately written, this letter is misunderstood by the Blocks, who remain unaware of the real needs of the Lines. A Bridge Character, who has lived in both domains, helps the Lines make their letter readable to the Blocks, who then rush immediately to the rescue.

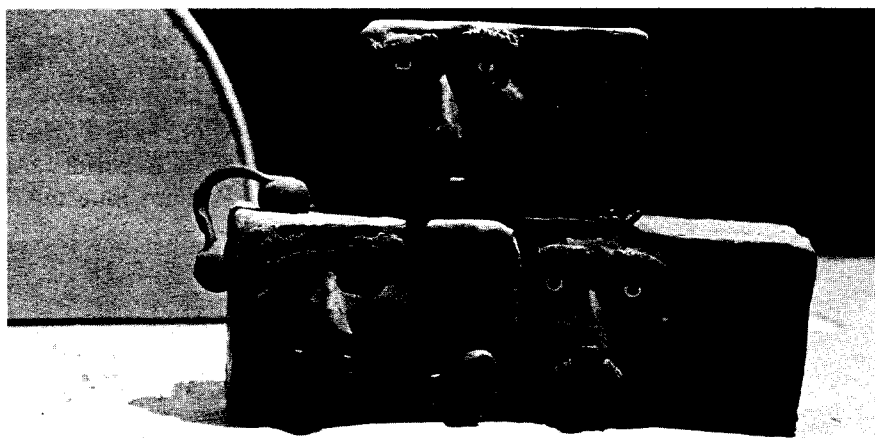
The Line People's intention — to relate their plight to a distant unfamiliar audience — mirrors a situation faced by most writers at one time or another. As the film demonstrates, writers can fail to communicate with readers because the writers have failed to understand the expectations

and needs of their audience; readers who do not understand texts do not respond to them as their writers hope they will.

Formative Evaluation

The Research Coordinator for *Write Write*, Renee Hobbs, learned that instructional materials for use in schools are often produced without advice from teachers and consequently fail to be genuinely useful. We have sought teachers' advice during all production stages of *Write Write*; formative evaluation has been on-going since the FIPSE grant was awarded in September of 1980. A final phase of this formative evaluation was distribution and analysis of a survey questionnaire completed by many participants at the ECB Workshops and **Conference on Literacy in the 1980's** held in Ann Arbor in June. Teachers urged that instructional media dealing with topics of organization and audience analysis be produced.

The *Write Write* film is scheduled to be ready for distribution by Winter, 1982. I hope to conduct further research into the usefulness of *Write Write* in different educational settings, for different student audiences, and with different techniques for teaching. It is my hope that *Write Write* will yield insight into the value of giving students filmed dramatizations of composing processes that may figure in their success as writers.



Clay Blocks by Michael Frierson and Martha Garrett



Line Drawing by Susan Le Van