

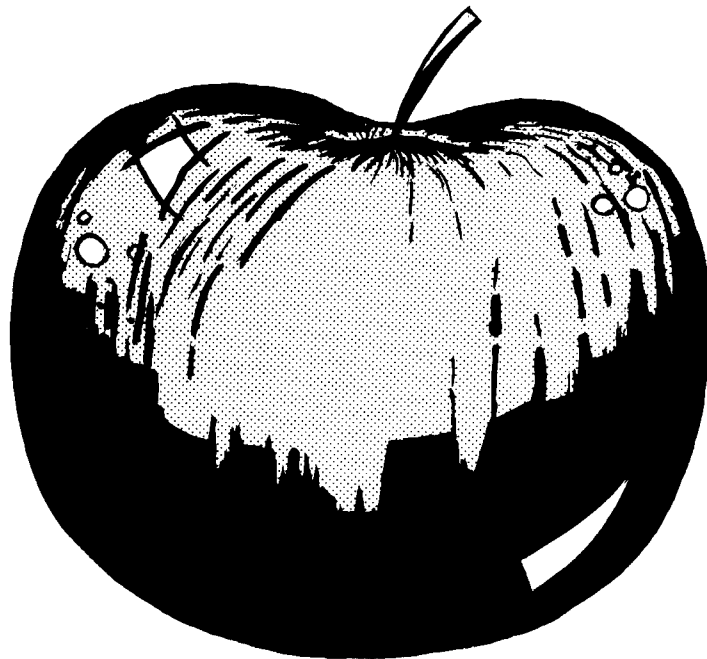
FFORUM

A Newsletter of the English Composition Board, University of Michigan

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Teacher to Teacher



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About This Issue

This issue of fforum particularly pleases me because it fulfills one of the wishes of those of us who decided, at the closing plenary session of the ECB's first writing workshop in 1979, to continue our mutual dialogue and instruction in this newsletter. As teachers of writing at all levels of instruction (elementary, middle, secondary, college, and university), our wish was that we might become a community of writing teachers who share our best thoughts and practices with one another. In Teacher to Teacher, we have translated our wish into print: Teachers at all levels of instruction have described how they use writing and reading activities to teach their students to think about the subjects they teach.

Jane Hansen introduces the issue with a description of activities she and her colleagues have designed to enable their first-grade students to assume responsibility for their own learning. Jeffrey L. Cryan, Peter Trenmouth, and David E. Tabler follow with descriptions of practices they have developed for teaching high school students to write and think.

In the next six essays, Jack Meiland, David Bartholomae, Jeffrey E. Evans, Helen Isaacson, Robert Coles, and Rudolf Arnheim describe courses they teach to college students in philosophy, composition, psychology, folklore, social inquiry, and the psychology of the arts, respectively. In each case, these teachers ask their students to write and read in order to think about the subjects they are studying as well as the methods of inquiry that shape those subjects.

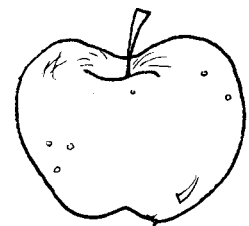
In his essay, William E. Coles, Jr. explains the rationale for practices he has developed to train new teachers of writing to teach in styles which suit them as individuals and according to guidelines which give their courses substantial integrity. Following Coles' essay are three others which describe pedagogical practices applicable at all levels of instruction. In his essay, Jay L. Robinson illustrates how teachers of

basic writers can teach their students about the norms of speech and the norms of writing; Barbra Morris demonstrates how teachers can use their students' experiences as television viewers to teach the effects of context upon language use; and Sandra Stotsky recommends that teachers at all levels help their students to become more effective writers by asking them to read increasingly rich and dense texts.

As is his custom, Robert Root concludes the issue with his column "Resources in the Teaching of Composition." He reviews a group of anthologies about the teaching of writing which have appeared over the past few years. Because the writers for this issue of fforum are describing a variety of courses in different areas, bibliographies accompany each article. The common "Select Bibliography" usually found in thematic issues of fforum is not to be found, therefore, in this issue.

I began this note by stating that this issue of fforum fulfills a wish for us. It also embodies a lesson. Teachers at all levels of instruction have much to teach one another. Those whose essays appear here describe pedagogical practices that echo one another: These practices assume that learning is discovery; that language is a powerful tool for discovery; that teaching students to write and to read is not only teaching students how to communicate but also teaching students how to learn and how to think.

Patti Stock



First-grade Writers Who Pursue Reading

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Everyone knows writing is hard except children who are just beginning first grade. Twenty-three of them were asked, "Can you write?"

"Yes," answered every child.

"Can you read?"

Only two children said, "Yes."

Then the children were given journals and they wrote.

On September 17 Susan, who had said earlier she couldn't read, wrote:

MIMOMISHBE

EKIKRO

When she showed it to someone else she said, "I bet you can't read this, but I can. I wrote it. Want me to read it to you? My mom is happy because I can read. "

Susan is part of a case-study research project on the relationship between reading and writing which three of us--Ellen Blackburn (the teacher), Don Graves, and I--began during the 1981-1982 school year and will continue during the 1982-83 school year. In 1981-82, Don and I spent part of three days each week in Ellen's classroom in Great Falls School, located in a lower-middle class community in Somersworth, New Hampshire, an old New England mill town, studying three children who represented low, middle, and high achievement levels. We collected data about the reading and writing of these children on video and audio tapes, protocol forms, and in notes taken during frequent interactions and conferences with the children.

In order to make the relationship between reading and writing as obvious as possible to the children, we gave identical

definitions to both reading and writing and created similar learning environments for their reading and writing periods in class: We defined both reading and writing as the process of composing a message; and during reading and writing periods in class, Ellen Blackburn expected the students to assume responsibility for their work. She taught them to make decisions, and as they gained knowledge about making decisions in writing and reading their sense of responsibility grew and they pursued messages. Their perseverance started with their writing: They wrote and learned about the processes in which they engaged as they composed messages (Graves, 1982). The same applied to reading: During the reading period, they all had stories in front of them for the entire period.

In this class, students are provided frequent opportunities to read and write, and they interact with others as they read and write so they may gain feedback in order to improve. The classroom buzzes during reading sessions just as it does during writing sessions: Randy chooses to read with Carlos. Susan chooses to read with a group of friends. Marie curls up in a corner by herself. Ellen Blackburn has a group with her--a group of students of mixed reading levels who have chosen to read together. This interaction is important because beginning readers need a lot of help; and they need to get much of that help from each other, since the teacher alone cannot answer all their questions.

During times when she meets with groups, Ellen Blackburn teaches students to confer with each other the way she confers with them. She teaches them four types of interactions, or conferences, which I will describe separately although they do not occur discretely.

Initiating Conferences

An initiating conference occurs when children need to get started. They may need help in choosing topics for writing or selecting books to read. Each time they come to the writing table or each time the reading period begins, they decide whether to continue with texts they are currently working on or to choose new ones. For example, when children choose stories they may stay with them until the stories flow; or, if their choices are inappropriate, they may put the stories aside. This practice is posited upon the assumption that when children choose the topics of their writing or the stories they will read, they have an investment in the pieces: There is a message they want to create, and they persist until they have done so.

One day Toby consulted George about his writing:

T: "Should I write about sledding or my new goldfish?"

G: "You have a new goldfish? Where did you get it?"

T: "My memere got it for me. You should see the aquarium it has. Maybe I'll write about that."

G: "Yeah, our whole class went sledding so everyone knows about that topic already."

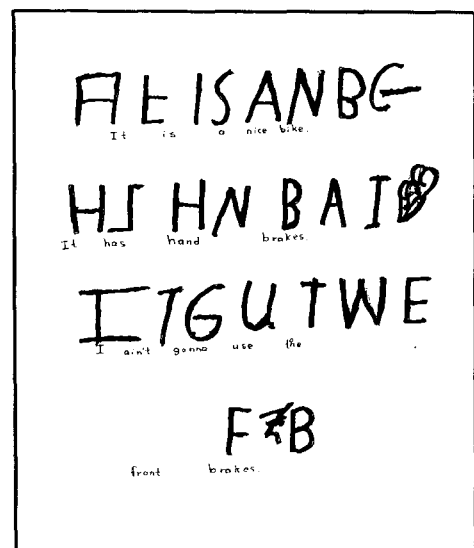
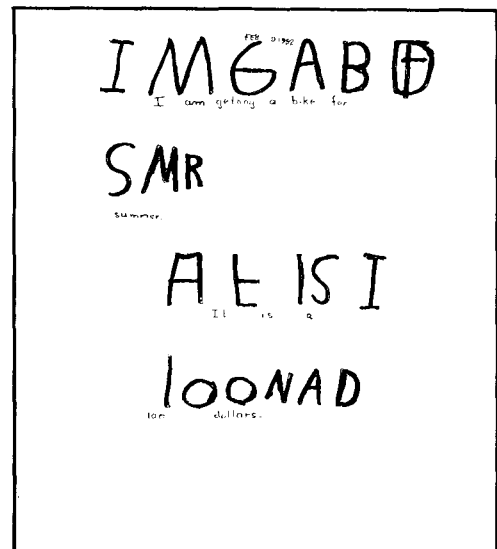
Toby chose the topic of his writing—which could just as easily have been the topic of his reading—by consulting with a classmate. And the teacher honored the choice.

Comprehension Conferences

A comprehension conference helps children clarify messages. Such interactions

begin when children read texts to others. The initial responses are focused on the content of the piece.

One day Carlos had just written this piece and read it to me:



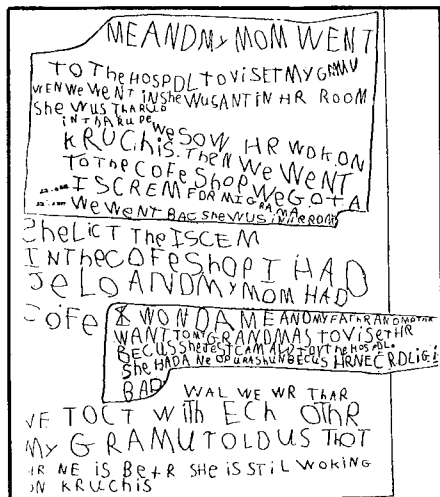
As he touched another piece of paper he said, "I can't decide if I should add some more information to it."

Referring to his text, I asked why he had written that he would never use the front brakes. He explained that he might be thrown off if he did. I told him I didn't know that because I don't know much about dirt bikes, and I wondered if it would be important information to add.

"I'm going to go talk to Jamie," he responded. "He has a dirt bike so he knows a lot about them." The responsibility for making the decision about what to do with his text rested with Carlos. He would seek advice, and he would decide.

Because the children in this class want their messages to be clear, they seek conferences until they are satisfied with their pieces. They approach their writing as something that can be revised as it emerges. They know their "drafts" improve their messages.

I happened to walk by Jon one day after he had written most of the text in Figure 2 about his grandma's knee operation.



I noticed he had cut his original story apart, pasted it on another sheet of paper, and had added new information in the middle as well as at the end. I asked Jon why he had cut apart his original story.

"Well, it didn't sound right."

"How did you know?"

"You see, when I read my first draft to Ms. Blackburn, then she read it back to me and it sounded funny."

"What sounded funny about it?"

"I had said we visited my grandma at her house and we visited her in the hospital, but we had visited her in the hospital FIRST, so I had to cut it apart and put that part first!"

No one told Jon to reorganize his piece. After all reorganization is a lot of work. Jon chose to reorganize himself because he was determined to make his message right. Just as the teacher gives these children initial control in the choice of their topics, she is careful not to take responsibility for an emerging text away from them.

The task of constructing meaning is not restricted to writing in this classroom. Rereading is as prevalent as rewriting. Children who get bogged down the first time through a story and find the message muddy frequently choose to reread; often they reread books many times.

One day Marie had just finished a book and approached me with a dejected look, "It ended funny."

"What do you mean?"

"I don't get it."

We talked about the book and because she couldn't explain it to her satisfaction, she reread it with a friend. By the time they finished the two of them were involved in a discussion about what it meant. I listened.

Skills Conferences

Skills conferences in reading and writing occur when they are needed and only after the individual writer or reader is satisfied with the content of a piece.

Don Graves conducted a skills conference in writing with Susan one day when he saw she had used quotation marks and parentheses.

"What do those marks mean, Susan?"

"Well, these (pointing to the quotation marks) are what you use when kids talk and these (parentheses) are what you use when grown-ups talk."

Because students write freely, concentrating on their messages and not worrying about spelling or parentheses, they are able to create texts.

The skills conferences in reading, like those in writing, place the skills in context. In a skills conference the teacher helps the children apply appropriate word attack skills to their texts. For example, the teacher may encourage a child who remembers seeing a word he cannot now identify to thumb back through the book to find it on a preceding page where he did read it. Sometimes children recognize a word as one they used in their writing but cannot identify it.

I was with Randy one day when he came across the word what. He couldn't identify it but said it was in one of his stories. He got his writing folder, found the appropriate story among four in the folder, found the right page, noted the word, and went back to his book. This took ten minutes, but he did not feel rushed. He wanted to figure the problem out for himself. Like the other children in the class, he had confidence in his ability to learn how to read.

Process Conference

The process conferences provide the thread that runs through all of the conferences. Although initiating, comprehension, skills, and process conferences may occur at different times, the teacher weaves process questions into all of them. The teacher does so to encourage children to talk about what they are doing in order to learn. If children are to take the responsibility for their learning, they need to recognize why and how they make decisions about their learning activities. Their teacher's questions to them about the processes in which they engage helps them to learn why and how they make decisions as well as why and how they might make better ones.

In writing conferences they talk about what makes a good topic or in reading conferences, about what would be a good

book to choose. They learn that writers write best when they write about something they know well. They know that writing begins with having something to write about; therefore, they think about writing on Saturdays, for example, when their family goes bottle digging. Some of the titles of their writing illustrate their topics: *My Cold*, *Watching My Baby Sister Get Born*, *My Cousin Lisa*, *My Dad's Truck*, *My Broken Arm* and *My Loose Tooth*.

When I asked one of the children what makes a good writer, the answer was, "Someone who does lots of things. I don't mean in school. We all do the same things in school. I mean on the weekends."

Similarly, these students choose their reading materials and reading method with an awareness of their needs. They select their reading materials--their own stories, the published stories of other children, basals, trade books, and books at the listening center--based upon their current interests. Often they choose to learn how to read stories they have heard before:

"Why did you pick 'Rabbit and Skunk'?"

"Because Amanda read it to me so I know the story. It helps to learn the words if you know the story."

As they evolve their own plans for their own reading programs, they plan with three books on their mind--one they can read well and enjoy reading over and over again; one they are working on; and one they intend to learn to read next. They know that in order to learn how to read they need to review, practice new stories, and try harder ones. And they decide when to read alone, when to read with a partner, and when to read in a group. If a child intends to learn how to read a new story and thinks it will be somewhat difficult, he often wisely chooses to read with a partner.

Children in this classroom talk about why different people understand things differently.

One day Randy explained how terrible the child in a story must have felt, "Well, I know of a time when I felt sad, and I REALLY felt sad."

"When was that?"

"When my dad moved out."

Another boy told a sad story about when his family used to live in Alaska. Then a third boy told about how he gets upset when his little sister messes up his things. Finally I asked Randy whether all children would be thinking about the same things when they read. Of course, he said they wouldn't; and of course, I asked why not. He answered, "Because different things happen to all of us so the stories mean different things to all of us."

Within their skills conferences the children are also encouraged to talk about how to use the skills they are learning.

One day when Susan had chosen to read one of Reggie's published books, Ms. Blackburn asked her, "What will you do if you get stuck?"

"I'll sound it out."

"What will you do if you can't sound it out?"

"Ask Marie (the best reader among the girls)."

"Would you ask George?"

"Yep. He wrote it so he SHOULD know the words."

Because these children are in an environment where everyone talks, writes, and reads they pursue composing with zest. It's the thing to do. They approach blank pieces of paper with ideas and they approach books with ideas. Print is accessible to them. They know where it comes from. The words on the pages of books are someone's story. That author

has something to share. It is probably interesting and it would be fun to find out what it is.

One day Randy had read The Three Little Pigs to me from his basal. I asked him what he planned to learn how to read next.

"I don't know," he answered softly and wandered off across the room. Later, when I was leaving for the day, he cornered me, "I'm planning what I want to learn to read next. I'll have something to read to you next time you come."

The next time I arrived he greeted me, "Hey Mrs. Hansen, I have a book I'm learning how to read!"

When he finished More Spaghetti, I say! I asked, "Are you going to continue learning how to read this or are you going to go on to something else?"

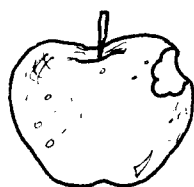
"Oh, I'm going to finish learning how to read this. I don't know it too good yet. Then I'll learn how to read some others. You know Mrs. Hansen, there are only three months of school left!"

A few days later, Randy sought me out in the classroom, "I can read it excellent now. Wanna hear it?"

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Graves, Donald. Writing: Teachers and Children at Work. Exeter, New Hampshire: Heinemann, 1982.

Describes the writing process as it evolves in children who write frequently in classrooms taught by teachers interested in the writing process.



Back to Basics: Thoughtful Composition and Meaningful Grammar

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Much of the work to revise composition curricula which is now being conducted by "back-to-basics" advocates--in reaction to the poor writing and declining test scores of students--proceeds from a fundamental misconception of the process of composition. This misconception assumes that the elements characteristic of good writing can be isolated and taught through a series of workbook exercises, that a quick-fix approach can eradicate the symptoms of poor writing. Unfortunately this approach focuses students' attention upon editorial skills at the expense of involving them in activities which require them to make meaning. Back-to-basics advocates too often ignore the necessary interdependence of the many elements which together produce thoughtful writing. In so doing they leave students with an inadequate sense of the richness of language as a heuristic. As English teachers we need to address the problems which concern the back-to-basics reformers, but when we do so we need to remember that composition is not simply the neat sum of a series of objectively measurable skills, but the thoughtful development of meaning by writers. Instead of teaching writing by the building-block methods of the basic skills' advocates, we as English teachers need to stress the belief that the act of writing is an act of concept formation, and once we have done so, we need to develop methods of teaching based upon this belief.

In the process of writing as in the process of thinking, people create meanings; they form concepts by relating the events of their immediate perceptions to their past experiences. Not only is this continual process of assimilating the elements of their current perceptions into their world view a natural and regular part of peoples' lives, but an awareness of this process is essential for

effective writing and thinking. Therefore, our most basic work as teachers of composition is this: To ask our students to observe carefully and to reflect upon their observations in the light of what they already know--to ask our students to think.

In Visual Thinking, Rudolf Arnheim provides composition teachers with a useful explanation of how processes of thought begin with our perceptions of our surroundings. Arnheim argues: Perceptions are not isolated physiological phenomena; they constitute the initial stage of the cognitive process and provide forms and shapes for developing abstractions. As shapers of abstractions, perceptions order the thinking process itself. Because they are purposive and selective, they provide the initial form of developing concepts. Arnheim emphasizes the importance of careful perception: "Since reasoning about an object begins with the way the object is perceived, an inadequate percept may upset the whole ensuing train of thought" (Arnheim, p. 27). To develop a fuller understanding of an object, he suggests individuals make several observations of objects in a variety of situations so that they will develop richer, more honest concepts-- concepts better suited to productive thinking.

Arnheim's explanation of concept formation is especially useful to composition teachers because it suggests that meanings are created when concepts are formed and that concepts are created from perception. Because composition is a shaping process dependent upon concept formation, it too must begin with careful observation.

Too often, composition textbooks and composition teachers focus students' attention on the technical correctness of the final draft of their writing instead of

on the processes of developing meaning. Often, teachers and textbooks also make assignments that provide only titles or topics for compositions, without suggesting ways for students to make observations. These assignments naturally generate detached, meaningless writing because students are instructed to proceed from the preconceptions of the author of the assignment instead of from their own perceptions. Unless a student has developed an exceptional ability to form abstractions from abstractions, he is likely to find composition quite frustrating if continually asked to conceptualize from given data.

An exercise from one English textbook which imposes its own preconceptions upon students--ignoring the necessary priority of students' perceptions to students' compositions--asks students to develop a paragraph from one of these topic sentences: "Count on me as a passenger for a spaceship"; "Living in the atomic age challenges us"; "How to save money is a problem I have solved" (Christ and Carlin, p. 21). Would it not make more sense (and better paragraphs) for the authors of this text first to ask students to observe particular aspects of their surroundings and to base their writing upon their perceptions? For instance, a more useful assignment might ask which of the students' daily activities would probably be possible on a spaceship. Then, having provided the student a way of approaching the assignment, the instructions could tell the student to form a concept of being on a spaceship. A paragraph based upon such an assignment would be more meaningful to students simply because it asks them to begin with the perceptions of their own daily experiences. Because the version of the assignment I suggest is based upon the students' real-life activities, it might initially appear to be the less imaginative exercise. On the contrary, it is more likely to engage students' imaginations because it asks them to explore familiar images as they imagine life on a spaceship.

When we assign compositions to our stu-

dents, we need to be conscious of this early stage of the meaning-making process if we expect students to develop and articulate concepts. To assign compositions without providing time or directions for students to make use of their own perceptions is to dissociate writing from the development of meaning.

Despite the fact that asking students to form concepts is the basis of a composition curriculum, many secondary schools' curricula require that writing be taught within a program based upon the assumptions of traditional grammar books which approach composition differently. In the preface to English Grammar and Composition, John Warriner articulates the underlying premise of such programs: "Grammar is placed first in the book because most teachers wish to be sure that the terminology of language study is firmly grasped early in the year" (Warriner and Treanor, p. iii). Warriner's assumption that a student's ability to name the parts of speech and the elements of a sentence must precede the ability to compose reflects the tendency of post-Sputnik American educators to teach to quantifiable, isolated objectives, usually at the expense of the development of the thinking process. The traditional grammar's reliance upon objective exercises with "right" answers leads students to develop a simplistic notion of language. Exercises comprising sentences that are without context have been designed so that the student will be able to identify a "right" answer. They encourage the student to view language as a sort of mathematics in which ambiguities and shades of meaning are problems to be overcome rather than rich possibilities. When students do write within a curriculum guided by such principles, they often try to be "right"--to compose with the black-and-white, right-or-wrong language of the exercises. They become more concerned with avoiding errors than they are with expressing meaningful ideas. It is little wonder that so many compositions written with traditional grammar and composition texts as their models are incomprehensible.

Fortunately, there is a theory of grammar

that can serve a thoughtful composition curriculum. In the Bay Area Writing Project pamphlet Working Out Ideas: Predication and Other Uses of Language, Josephine Miles presents the basis of a grammar that requires students to generate their own sentences and to see the subject-predicate relationships in the sentences as the basis of their meanings. Because her grammar asks students to identify their own subjects, it asks students to begin the composing process with their own perceptions. Once students have their own subjects, they make sentences by choosing predicates: "Sentence-making is predication, and to predicate is to assert an idea, selecting and treating facts from a point of view" (Miles, p. 6). Miles's grammar treats the sentence as an expression of an idea, making the act of composition analogous to Arnheim's act of thinking. The subject-predicate relationship she describes echoes the association between percept and concept that Arnheim describes.

Miles's grammar offers students a meaningful way to understand the effectiveness of their own language. Her approach teaches students to make use of such a grammar as they revise their own compositions: to isolate the bases of their concepts by foregrounding their subject-predicate relationships; to become conscious of their own developing concepts by focusing their attention on the appropriateness of particular subject-predicate relationships; to determine if they are consciously classifying and renaming subjects, providing readers a fuller understanding of their ideas or if they are unconsciously repeating the same subjects; and to develop an awareness of the richness of their ideas by expressing them with carefully chosen predicates. Grammar used in this way can increase writers' awareness of modification, subordination, and coordination, and can give writers reasons to consider linguistic conventions, not for their own sake as "right answers" to isolated problems, but as useful means for developing meaning. Using this approach to grammar shifts the focus of classroom attention from the examination of errors to the

exploration of possibilities. A student who has invested the energy necessary to compose a thoughtful piece of writing is much more likely to be interested in learning the styles and technical skills that will help to develop his meaning.

We English teachers do need to examine our writing curricula, but not for the reasons cited by the back-to-basics reformers; we need to move away from exactly the sort of isolation of concepts that such reformers advocate. We must help our students to develop a sense of the usefulness of writing; for only with that sense will they develop a concern for acquiring the technical skills that will make their meaning comprehensible to their readers. Our examination of our various composition curricula should proceed from the premise that the discipline of written composition is a thinking process in which the writer forms concepts from his perceptions of the world. We must be sure to provide for sensible methods of teaching such as the ones suggested by Josephine Miles, which echo enlightened theories such as those developed by Rudolf Arnheim. We must do so because we wish students to compose from their own perceptions rather than from the preconceptions of traditional exercises that ignore this crucial early--and individual--stage of composition. A curriculum based upon a clear understanding of the writing process offers us hope that students will become more conscious of the development of meaning in their writing and, by extension, such a curriculum will address the most basic need in any writing classroom--the need for thoughtful composition.

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Arnheim, Rudolf. Visual Thinking. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1969.

Arnheim explores the relationship between sensory perception and reasoning. The book is particularly useful for its clear explanation of the process of concept formation and for its rational advocacy of arts in education.

Christ, Henry I. and Jerome Carlin. Modern English in Action (Grade 8). Lexington, Massachusetts: D.C. Heath and Company, 1975.

Modern English in Action is the name of a series of widely-used grammar and composition texts for Grades 7-12. It offers a traditional, isolated-skills approach to language study.

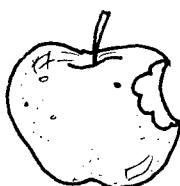
Miles, Josephine. Working Out Ideas: Predication and Other Uses of Language. Berkeley: Bay Area Writing Project, 1979.

This pamphlet is a collection of Josephine Miles's essays which introduce teachers to

her theory of composition. Her theory focuses on the subject-predicate relationship as being at the heart of a writer's meaning.

Warriner, John E. and John H. Treanor. English Grammar and Composition 8. New York: Harcourt, Brace and World, 1963.

There have been many subsequent editions of the widely used "Warriner's" text since the 1963 edition, each with a revised preface that explains how the book adheres to the latest trends. The book's business-like philosophy and format remain essentially unchanged since the earliest editions.



Teachers, Students, and Artists: Human Sense in the English Class

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Writing is not a skill, but an art, and the teaching of writing, like all good teaching, is an art. If our students' writing is to improve, we must make them artists, persons who understand Henry James's definition of the artist's joy: "Life being all inclusion and confusion and art being all discrimination and selection...the artist finds in his tiny nugget, worked free of awkward accretions and hammered into sacred hardness, the very stuff for a clear affirmation, the happiest chance for the indestructable" (James, The Art, p. 120). We know from studying art--whether a Renaissance statue, a Beethoven symphony, a Henry James novel, or even an animated film like Snow White--that composing is a heuristic, an ongoing process more complex than a linear march from inspiration to refinement. The elements of composition interact as a dialectic, serving to separate as well as mix, to exclude as well as include, and to deny as well as confirm.

The best composing methods remain loyal to the self's inner vision--the imagination--what Ann Berthoff calls "the form-finding and form-creating power" (Berthoff, The Making, p. 28). Composing defies simplistic formulas which dictate how to construct narrative, descriptive, and expository paragraphs along with their various supporting details. Unfortunately, we teachers advance a different notion of composition when we propose step-by-step rules for writing, and when we also define cohesiveness as verbal paraphernalia held to a topic sentence by the imposed logic of a formal outline. We should advance the theory that true cohesiveness is compatible with the mind's power to compose. Josephine Miles explains: "It is that...sort of inert trust in data as data, uninterpreted, and a counter mistrust of human thought (that) has led Americans to

teach fact rather than ideas and accumulation rather than composition" (Miles, p. 8). The imagination, we think, is an elusive beast, difficult to define and especially to trust. Therefore, we ignore it, choosing to admire it rather than to train it.

Because most of us who teach English began to do so as lovers of literature, we enjoy teaching that best. We also tend to view the study of language--grammar, vocabulary, spelling, and sometimes writing--as isolated word work. At the secondary level we too often err in thinking that our subject is made up of so many segregated units, that there really is no common bond connecting them. Our greatest error would be to promote the myth that "the student who can solve problems, as problems, divorced from human sense, is the student who will succeed in the educational system" (Donaldson, p. 66), for this would mean that those students who master the labels may still know nothing about reconstructing sense impressions, ideas, and feelings as sentences and paragraphs and that those students whose failures have further darkened their bleak self-images will continue to fail. But if we see language as an instrument of the imagination and strive to exercise our students' imaginations, the intricacies of language will become their tools; experiences with the dialectics between thought and language, between recognition and classification, and between generalities and particularities will become the synthesizing forces of their language activity; and the study of English--literature and language--will enable them to make meaning from human experiences.

In a ninth grade class I tried to tie together several related aspects of our English studies by focusing on Jack London's story "To Build a Fire" in which

the narrative's single character, a nameless man, is walking from one place to another in Alaska while the temperature is seventy-five degrees below zero. A sequence of mishaps, which could have been avoided, results in the man's freezing to death. In class discussions, I tried to elicit ideas about the story's theme from my students, but I was repeatedly met with morals such as "Don't go out in the cold alone" and "Always listen to advice." The transition from understanding plot to understanding theme is difficult. The students mastered protagonist and antagonist and setting and plot, but no substantial ideas about themes developed. Finally, I indicated a page number and paragraph in the story which I hoped would generate deeper thought:

The trouble with him was that he was without imagination. He was quick and alert in the things of life, but only in the things, and not in the significances. Fifty degrees below zero meant eighty-odd degrees of frost....It did not lead him to meditate upon his frailty as a creature of temperature, and upon man's frailty in general...and from then on it did not lead him to the conjectural field of immortality and man's place in the universe.

"What does this mean?" I asked. Their answers now were good. They explained how the man was doomed from the start. A passage that earlier had little meaning now stimulated connections between this story and present-day concerns about the environment and our planet's undervalued ecological system. Furthermore, the students focused on other examples of human folly and poor judgment that resembled the man's thinking. The difference between things and significances, like the difference between plot and theme, is no easy distinction. The class grasped the ideas as we struggled through chaos, then on to particulars and oppositions, and finally to a concept. But beyond the story's association with disciplines outside the immediate realm of English, we had discovered something else. We saw that it was the man's responsibility to make significances out of things, which is precisely the same responsibility student writers have, because such revela-

tions are not necessarily apparent. The primary function of the mind, the function which elevates the mind above instinct and makes it an instrument for reasoning, is its capacity--indeed, its responsibility--to make perceptions and not just observations. For this we need to think, and thinking is governed by the basic, natural law governing all the universe: Nothing comes from nothing. We must construe the significances of things; we must make meaning.

As writers begin this "making," a list of unarticulated initial responses surface. They are usually a collection of nouns and perhaps verbs and adjectives. There is no form yet, and for this reason, often quick-fix writers will abandon their lists before they have written them, searching in their verbal jungle for a central idea as though they were Ponce de Leon lost in the Everglades. If the writers stay with their lists and try to structure chaos into clusters of similar impressions or set impressions against each other by matching adjectives with nouns and generating verbs to go with them, they will begin the process of composing; that is, they will be using the particulars at hand to form perceptible conclusions. Each writer's goal at this point is not syntactical sophistication or even simple sentences but rather an attempt to identify a what (things or events) together with a how and why that predicate and modify the what. At no time during these initial steps should the shadow of an English teacher be peering over student writers' shoulders ready to pounce on the first errors of subject-verb agreement. As J.W. Patrick Creber writes, "They must learn to perceive before we ask them to organise their perception" (Creber, p. 51).

When we English teachers think of composition as the continuum Creber suggests it is, we realize that the writing act is a perpetual motion machine involving choices and that the writing process both consumes and generates language as it demands evaluations which in turn ignite two desires--the desire for understanding and the desire for a vocabulary with which to probe language itself. But the

first has priority over the second. This second desire often leads to an appreciation for the aesthetic as well as the functional value of formal usage. This is why it is important that when we teachers must evaluate "honesty and authenticity on the one hand, and formal correctness on the other, it is the former that we must chiefly aim to preserve" (Creber, p. 71).

Since literature broadens our experiences, and provides occasions for analysis and interpretation, I often assign students writing tasks based on reading in order to give them rich opportunities to make meaning. At times I have tried to structure my students' experiences with a particular work by using study guide questions, which I have prepared or which have been prepared by "professionals." These contrivances make class preparation easier because I can base my discussion on the questions which probe that day's assignment; however, such probes do a disservice to literature by fragmenting the art into components that rarely fit into the student's mind as well as they do the teacher's.

In a tenth-grade class, I recently experimented with a published kit designed to make the teaching of a particular novel or play easier. These kits work on the premise that the teacher need only read the book (maybe not even that) because the rest of his work has been done for him. Among the tests, chronologs, and character sketches are study guide questions for chapters or acts. The teacher's edition contains the answers (in Scriptural red), while the students are on their own. Along with the obvious hypocrisy is this brand of learning: The student strives to come up with the answer that will please the teacher.

As an experiment, I gave question sheets to my tenth grade class after we had read and listened to a tape of the first two acts of Arthur Miller's The Crucible. I told them not to write answers on the sheets themselves but rather to draw a line down the centers of several notebook pages and take notes as I dictated the answers directly from the teacher's edi-

tion. After the dictation I assigned a question to each student. Each student was to deliver an oral presentation the next day that answered the question better than my dictation did. The class would take notes again, this time on the opposing side of the page from the original answer. The results were terrific. The second round of answers was much longer and better than the first. Students proved to each other that questions like "Why does Abigail lie?" cannot be answered with one or two sentences because the playwright's composing process does more than tie together neat little plot developments with thematic arguments.

Later, we followed the same procedure with the final two acts. A follow-up writing assignment focused on the trial scene. Reverend Hale, originally a strong advocate for the rooting out of witches, is revolted by the court's stupidity and abuses, and in the third act he shouts, "I denounce these Proceedings!" I began the assignment by asking the class to give nouns orally in response to the question (not topic sentence) "Why Does Hale Denounce the Proceedings?" Their responses were very perceptive, and I listed them on one side of a line drawn down the center of the board. I ended the list at about fifteen. In response to names of characters in the play, came nouns like "pretense," "distortion," and "self-righteousness." I then asked for verb lists to go with each noun. Again, the responses were quick. For particular characters like Abigail Williams there were words specifying noticeable behavior: "lies," "manipulates," "threatens," and "accuses." Sometimes the verbs indicated keener observations. For instance, Elizabeth Proctor also "lies," but one student determined that she "sacrifices" as well. My role at first was merely to list the verbs with their corresponding nouns. Initially, I did not ask for clarification, even though a relationship between subject and predicate might be vivid for one student but not for others. I emphasized that we would not qualify or disagree with any choice until all were listed. The board was soon covered with the cores for nearly a hundred sentences,

far more than were needed; but within the huge informal listing stood the invitation to make choices, to define and refine one's understanding of The Crucible, Act III--an invitation to be artists. Making meaning was becoming tantalizingly possible. Now clarification was in order. The question itself presented a what and posed a why. An answer would also need to add a how by explaining the court's twisted reasoning. Whatever evolved as a topic sentence developed from this process and was not a reiteration of the assignment's title.

Weak verbs were passed over for stronger ones. The discussion, at times a lively debate, brought another dimension: Modification became necessary. Grammatical jargon was downplayed; instead, the conditions under which a certain conclusion is true were emphasized. And those conditions, the oppositions and correlations, dictated the need for mature sentences or, at least, additional sentences for specification. The resulting compositions which were finished for homework explained, among other things, the court's inability to recognize the difference between a lie that protects a liar and a lie that protects a loved one. These compositions showed how distortion and pretense were being valued over truth and sacrifice in Miller's Salem.

This was a new challenge in writing for most of these students, an experience which demonstrated that the balance and relationships between generalities and particulars exist only when one composes them. It was not an exercise in plugging components together. Nor is writing, they discovered, the final step in learning, but rather a necessary tool in promoting learning, because the composing process, based in analysis and interpretation, is the best method for increasing understanding. We began a composition together, seeking significant answers to a question which defied an easy answer. The compositions showed a human sense had been formed. Each student avoided canned terminology and artificial outlining and sought instead to make choices, to find "his tiny nugget, washed free of awkward

accretions and hammered into...the very stuff for a clear affirmation." Together, we had become artists.

References

Berthoff, Ann E. Forming Thinking Writing.
Rochelle Park, New Jersey: Hayden Book Co., Inc.,
1978.

Berthoff presents her theories about "generating chaos" as a first step in the composing process and explains how this can progress to classifying and specifying and finally to editing. Her approach is "assisted invitations," a collection of short writing challenges that make her theories vivid and excite the writer's imagination.

. The Making of Meaning.
Montclair, New Jersey: Boynton/Cook, 1981.

This text further explains Berthoff's theories about learning and composing as being "preeminently a matter of forming structures." Included are pieces by such thinkers as William James, Alfred North Whitehead, Jane Addams, Leo Tolstoy, Marie Montessori, Northrop Frye, I.A. Richards, Paulo Freire, and Paul Freund.

Creber, J.S. Patrick. Sense and Sensibility.
London: University of London Press, 1965.

A book originally written for British secondary school teachers, this text explains a four-year approach to bring students from observations to perceptions to cohesive, literate expression. Creber employs such non-writing techniques as mime and creative dramatics to aid his young students in making their own meanings.

Donaldson, Margaret. "The Mismatch Between Schools and Children's Minds," Human Nature (March, 1979), 60-67.

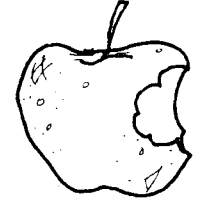
This article includes new interpretations of some of Piaget's experiments. Donaldson concludes "that we tended both to underestimate children's competence as thinkers and to overestimate their understanding of language." For this reason children need both respect and patience as they are taught to become literate.

Miles, Josephine. Working Out Ideas: Predication and Other Uses of Language. Berkeley: University of California, Bay Area Writing Project.

Miles attacks glibness and irresponsible writing by stressing the importance of both

particulars and generalities in writing.

The Henry James quote from The Art of the Novel is from his Preface to The Spoils of Poynton.



Writing Humanistically

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One of the perennial problems of English teachers is how to integrate the teaching of composition skills effectively into a course where instructional time is predominantly concerned with the teaching of literature. The Humanities course at Ann Arbor's Pioneer High School is a classic example of a course in which this problem exists both because the course surrounds the Humanities teacher with an abundance of "content"--not only in literature but in art, music, and intellectual history as well--and because the chronological momentum of this team-taught course discourages leisurely dalliance at the individual teacher's whim.

Humanities thus especially exemplifies a course in which instructors must create writing assignments which require students to make rhetorical decisions while writing about literature. If a student can tell about the plight of Hecuba and her ladies from Odysseus' point of view, he has entered imaginatively into Euripides' tragedy of the Trojan Women. Not only does this assignment require a higher degree of empathetic involvement than a "straight" critical analysis, but it also forces writers to deal with the rhetorical problem of adjusting voice and diction.

I do not mean to emphasize a kind of gimmicky pseudo-creativity over straightforward criticism. The latter is very important and probably constitutes at least half of the students' writing. However, a dual description of a given object or scene, written from the point of view of Charles Bovary and then of Emma has triple value: it provides a structured rhetorical exercise that asks students to make comparisons and contrasts; it requires students to demonstrate that they do in fact understand the clash between Romanticism and Realism; and it allows students to create

truly sympathetic responses to a major work of literature.

The nature of the material taught in Humanities also lends itself to assignments in which the tone and the audience for the students' writing may be effectively structured. While students are required to understand the content of the course if they are to successfully fulfill assignments such as the illustrative ones that follow, they are also asked to think about the material in what may be new and creative ways. Here are several assignments which ask students to write about the content of the course for particular audiences, purposes, and occasions.

- a. A parent has complained about the immorality of the Canterbury Tales. Defend its use in our curriculum. (The assignment could include a letter of complaint from a parent to the School Board itemizing certain specific objections to the work.)
- b. Write a letter to the head of the Curriculum Committee explaining why a certain book should be included in the course. (This writing task is a good method for supplementary reading.)
- c. We have just finished our study of the British Romantic poets. We had two purposes during this unit of study: to understand the basic elements of Romanticism as an intellectual and artistic movement of the nineteenth century and to develop and practice skills in reading poetry. Suppose that we can use only five poems next year to accomplish these purposes. Based on your extensive study of this material, write me a letter identifying the five poems you feel would best accomplish our stated goals.

Each of these assignments requires students to demonstrate knowledge of subject matter: They cannot make their case effectively with vague generalizations,

mere plot summary, or careless inaccuracies. The specified writing situations give them clear purposes and audiences. Their task is defined: They are forced to make rhetorical decisions about the voice in which they will speak, the tone they will assume, and the diction they will choose.

The following examples demonstrate another kind of assignment that pulls students directly into a work of literature through written role-playing. Assignments such as these also accomplish the dual purposes for which the teacher of composition in a literature-oriented class strives.

- a. Create a conversation between two of the Canterbury pilgrims. Make sure that their characters are revealed as they talk.
- b. Write an interview with Faust suitable for publication in...Time?...the Ann Arbor News?... Playboy? (Not only will students have to decide what current topics might interest Faust and what his opinions might be, but they will also have to choose their audience and write in a style appropriate for that audience.)
- c. You are Ophelia, back in your room after witnessing the Mousetrap Play. What will you write in your diary?

On the whole I have had great success with such writing assignments: Students seem to find them both interesting and challenging, and I have received writing from students that is both of good quality and fun to read--not an insignificant bonus! I am not suggesting that they always work, however. One of the most dismal group of papers I ever received was the result of asking students to create a conversation between Candide and Faust on some contemporary issue. I have never figured out why it did not

work: It was no more fanciful than many others. I was expecting discussions of such topics as feminism, abortion, nuclear power, ecology, governmental corruption, or racism, in which the somewhat satirical, rather conservative voice of neo-classicism would contrast with the more idealistic, and revolutionary voice of romanticism.

Either students did not really understand the implications of the assignment or the subtleties of tone were too difficult for them to compose or, perhaps, Faust and Candide just did not have much to say to each other. I am not sure the idea is worth refining although it still fascinates me. Maybe I had the wrong people, maybe Hamlet and Raskolnikov? Emma Bovary and Nora Helmer? (Now they should have something to talk about!)

My commitment to creating composition assignments like these in a literature class was validated recently when I asked my students to write a proper obituary for Browning's Bishop of St. Praxed's. They immediately saw the problem: how to write an appropriate obituary and still reveal what they had to show me they knew about the Bishop. Not only did they solve the problem in a variety of clever and interesting ways, but they were also excited by the challenge to do so. They talked about it with each other, mentioned it to other teachers, and eagerly shared their results with the class, insisting that I read aloud the entire group of papers.

The following student texts illustrate their efforts:

The Bishop of Saint Praxed's church died yesterday in the presence of his nephews about whom it is said the Bishop felt quite paternally. Before his death he made arrangements for his tomb which typify his personality. His wishes are to be buried on the

epistle side of the pulpit. These request are quite appropriate as he held such a distinguished position. This position will be directly across from his dear friend and predecessor, Bishop Gandolf, that they might be eternally close. The service will be held on June 16; all mourners are welcome. Flowers may be sent directly to the church. All donations should be tossed into the tomb before the final closing by request of the Bishop.

Obituary for the Bishop

Yesterday in Rome the Bishop of Saint Praxed's Church, who for many weeks had been quite sick in bed, passed away. He was well-known for his interests in the Church, of course, as well as in Greek mythology and the Italian Renaissance. He spoke his last words to Anselm, the young man who recently came into a great deal of wealth upon the discovery of a hidden surplus of lapis lazuli. Anselm claims that the Bishop, who has never been concerned with materialistic things, wishes to be buried in a simple casket, his only request in regard to that casket being a wish for it to be placed as close to that of Old Gandolf as possible. The Bishop is survived by no one, but his death is mourned by the Church as well as Anselm and Anselm's brothers, who were like sons to the deceased and are also the inheritors of his wealth.

As they wrote about the Bishop, students learned and communicated a great deal about him: they also learned more about rhetorical stance, voice, audience, and diction, than they would have in a week's class discussions and instruction about these elements of effective writing.

Some of the most consistently successful writing assignments in Humanities are those which ask students to create their own modern versions of classical forms. These assignments help students explore connections between the past and present--one of the main purposes of the course.

For example, after reading the Odyssey and either Oedipus or the Trojan Women and exploring the concept of mythology and the purposes for which various writers use mythology, I ask students to create their own myths. Among my favorites of the myths I have received over the years are an explanation that the Edmund Fitzgerald sank in Lake Superior

due to Hades' anger because it was hauling ore stolen from his underground realm; an account of Odysseus' awakening in modern Greece to discover it was taken over by rightist totalitarian generals; and a wonderful summary of the politics of southeastern Michigan--the besieging of the DeTroiyans by an angry coalition of Suburban armies.

When we study Plato, I ask students for an original Socratic dialogue on a current controversial topic:

Prove in a Socratic dialogue that abortion is (not) morally acceptable; that creationism should (not) be taught in the schools; that women are (not) inherently inferior to men; that 18-year-olds should (not) be allowed to vote (drink).

The only limit to topics for this assignment is the mutual creativity of students and teacher. As young writers fulfill the assignment, they not only have to explore the issue's pros and cons within a strict logical framework, but they also have to recognize that their rhetorical decisions have to be consistent and appropriate. Best of all, while the assignment's structure gives students a clear purpose, it allows for a great deal of creativity and wit.

One student wrote the following satiric piece after reading Plato's Phaedo:

The Tough Tony

An Abridged Version Concentrating on the "Rotten Meat" Allegory

Persons of the Dialogue:

Scholtz:)

Schmidt:) Active Audience of the Dialogue.

Muggsey:)

Tough Tony: Narrator of the Dialogue.

Pete: Audience of the Narration.

Crazy John

Scene: Top Security Section, Some State Penitentiary.

Place: Some State.