

# Television Viewing Experience: Text and Context in the Development of Writing Skills

Jean Long  
Pioneer High School  
Ann Arbor, Michigan

Assumptions to be found in every good writing text and basic to every effective writing curriculum are (1) that schools are ultimately concerned with teaching critical thinking, (2) that writing facilitates disciplined thinking and learning, (3) that the teaching of writing influences students' critical sensitivity to values and moral issues. These assumptions of good texts and effective curricula were also my own when I began teaching composition to juniors and seniors at Ann Arbor's Pioneer High School. My goals were clear--to help students use writing to both organize and examine experience and to evaluate the significance of that experience. My basic text was Warriner's Composition: Models and Exercises--full of aesthetic experiences in good writing and suggestions for the student on how to emulate these models; the source of content for my courses in composition was my students' personal experience. While my requirement that students draw on their personal experiences sometimes led them to write fine journal entries and personal essays, far too often it caused them to draw blanks. Furthermore, the mechanical nature of my students' writing experience made me uneasy. It was clear that (1) my assignments and activities were not provoking my students to draw from a wide enough spectrum of their experiences and (2) imitation of sophisticated writing was not an adequate learning device for all students.

Something needed to change.

Reflecting on my twenty years of teaching high school English, I observed the increasing influence of television viewing on the lives of my students. I noted that their pre-class conversa-

tions, frequently about TV programs they viewed the night before, were usually emotive--they liked the good guy and the way he demolished the villain; they found the shoot out bloody and exciting. Their involvement with the world of television--far from casual--and the values they encounter in that medium and embrace as thoughtlessly and completely as my generation embraced the values presented in the movies, on radio, and in comic books prompted me to bring the television viewing experience of my students into the classroom for the kind of careful scrutiny I ask them to focus on works of literature. Through discussions of perceptions, techniques, and the ethical values embedded in TV, I planned first to provide motivation for my students and myself to achieve the learning/teaching goals for a course in composition, and second to "provide critical armor against the powerful sensory assaults by which pop culture conveys its mythic images" (Robert Jewett and John Lawrence, The American Monomyth. NY: Anchor Press, 1977).

As I prepared to study television with my students, I reviewed the literature on the uses of television and decided that my students' experience of TV as a medium would be the resource for achieving my teaching/learning goals; that is, I decided not to introduce TV programs designed to teach writing and composition into my class but to examine programs my students viewed regularly. Peter J. Dirr provides a useful set of distinctions that illustrate why I chose to make television programming that was part of my students' experience the content of my course. Dirr distinguishes "instructional television which is intended for use in the classroom and has carefully planned lessons, specific objectives, and

accompanying curriculum materials" and "television for instruction in which teachers adapt noninstructional programming for classroom use," from "unplanned educational television" (Peter J. Dirr, "The Future of Television's Teaching Face," in E. Palmer and A. Dorr (Eds.), Children and the Faces of Television. Academic Press, 1980).

### The Challenge

Choosing my students' continuing experience of TV as the educational resource of my composition class created a challenge for me. Library research did not provide me guidance in how to help students draw on their experience to develop their writing and thinking skills, or on how to teach students to use writing to organize and examine their viewing experience. Consequently, I proceeded on my own.

Furthermore, when I decided to use students' TV experiences as content for their writing, I was uncomfortably aware of my limited background in the medium. Since I wanted the students to examine their own viewing, I found that the programs we were studying together were programs I had never viewed, programs I was viewing for the first time in the classroom. However, this was one time when my ignorance of the subject matter in my own classroom provided an educational advantage to my students. The authorities on the programs we viewed were often my weaker writing students who acquired status and were drawn into the writing task by providing much needed information about plot and characters. When the writing began, they were already involved in the content and willing to write about it.

I can best illustrate how this happened by describing how I translated my intentions into a composition course. First, I asked my students to log their TV viewing for a week. I provided forms that divided the day into daytime and nighttime blocks on which students were to record every program they turned on.

I encouraged them to list programs they viewed in part or that provided background as they prepared for school in the morning or performed tasks around the house. When they handed in their log a week later, I tabulated the programs listed and identified the most popular programs--that is, the ones most frequently mentioned--programs such as "Hill Street Blues," "General Hospital," "Barney Miller," "M\*A\*S\*H," and "Quincy." I then asked our Media Center staff to tape the next episode of "Hill Street Blues" for viewing by the class as a whole. My plan was to look at the content of the program so as to provide students with material for writing an essay of analysis. While previewing the program, I listed the character's names and the plot elements since this program has a soap opera format with subplots frequently not completed within a given episode. Finally, I listed issues dealt with in the episode. The worksheet I provided for the students contained the following directions:

In film, values are communicated through verbal and visual cues. Likewise, this segment of "Hill Street Blues" uses a range of subtle and obvious cues that tell the viewer what behavior is good and what is bad, and what social roles and behaviors should be regarded sympathetically. Under each heading (of plot elements), list the cues you recall and their significance.

1. Morning briefing.
2. Nun at St. Mary's church.
3. Etc.

On the back of this sheet, I provided another list preceded by these instructions:

The following issues were raised. Please add any I have overlooked, and then rate them according to their importance to the writers and producers of this episode. Then list the reasons for your rating under the heading. Remember, HOW DO THE WRITERS AND PRODUCERS RATE THEM?

Your rating might be quite different but should be withheld for the moment.

1. Adultery.
2. IRS evasion.
3. Swearing by police officers.
4. Etc.

Finally, on a third page I listed the characters featured in this episode and asked the students to indicate how the writers and producers rated them from most admirable to least admirable. I left space for them to provide their reasons for their choices.

I passed out the worksheets the day of the viewing, using the whole hour for viewing the episode. The following day, the class discussed the episode. We discussed and corrected our misconceptions or confusions until we all understood who was who and what happened. Students spent the rest of the hour individually completing the worksheets described above. The following day, we compared notes in small groups and then all together, insisting that reasons should accompany each of our assertions. Students kept their notes from this exercise in their theme folders.

I did not use "Hill Street Blues" for a writing assignment on values because the ambiguity and complexity of the values presented might have been too much for some students to organize in their first writing assignment, and I wanted their first analytical essay on values to draw upon much more clear cut content. Instead, I videotaped an episode at random from "General Hospital," previewed it, listing names of characters with identifying attributes. This time I used the chalkboard for the list which was available before, during, and after the viewing. The central question I posed for discussion was "Who and what are we expected to admire?" Using "Hill Street Blues" for comparison, the class explored the social, economic, and ethnic background of the characters, their attractiveness, the handling of the police captain, the set of the program, the nature of the incidents, and anything

else we noticed about the episode from "General Hospital" that provided a comparison or contrast with "Hill Street Blues." The students and I were surprised at what we discovered. The values we identified were in stark contrast to those on "Hill Street Blues." As a group, we composed an introductory paragraph on the chalkboard that identified them as follows:

Americans are said to watch on the average of twenty-four hours of television a week. This makes it a powerful persuasive medium. It tells us what to buy, what to think, and what to be. The last is what I am concerned to explore in this essay using "General Hospital," a popular daytime soap opera, as an example. It projects values that suggest that self-fulfillment is found in money, power, social status, and romance.

I asked students to write using this introduction or one of their own for their essays. The assignment was fairly straight forward. They were to devote a paragraph to each one of the values listed in their introduction, providing support by using examples from the episode. I was delighted with the results. Accurate details, illustrative examples, and interesting insights made my task of reading and commenting stimulating and provided good further discussion when the papers were returned and several read aloud. Since I follow the practice of commenting on rough drafts, the class discussion that followed those rough drafts was reflected in the final drafts of several of the papers.

Using the programs mentioned earlier in this essay, I designed subsequent assignments to provide students' practice in organizing material by means of comparison/contrast, definition, classification, cause and effect, and to provide them practice in writing persuasive essays. In each case, students wrote only after class discussions in which we explored the values inherent in the programs we viewed. It became obvious that as a result of our discussions and their

writing about these programs, few of the students will ever view them quite the same way again.

The following examples of the assignments to which I refer suggest the discussions we had and the writings students did.

#### Sample Writing Assignments

1. Essay of analysis in which students identify the value content of an episode of "General Hospital."

Prewriting: What behaviors and personal circumstances are presented as admirable in this episode? List. Discuss.

Writing: In your introduction, generalize about the nature of the values presented. Humanistic? Materialistic? Power oriented? Achievement oriented? In the body of your paper, identify individual values giving examples from the program for support. Your conclusion should comment on the body of your paper.

2. Comparison and contrast essay which compares "Barney Miller" with "Hill Street Blues" as police dramas, or "M\*A\*S\*H" and "General Hospital" as hospital dramas. A comparison of "St. Elsewhere" and "General Hospital" would also be interesting.

Prewriting: What similarities and differences do you see in setting, characters, plot format, issues presented, atmosphere, etc.? List. Discuss.

Writing: In your introduction, state a thesis in which you take a stand on what similarities or differences you noted are more significant and why. In the body, support your thesis, listing and illustrating the significant similarities or differences. Your conclusion should, in some way, refer back to your thesis.

3. Essay of definition in which words such as "heroism" or "friendship" are defined using an episode of "Hill Street Blues" for illustration.

Prewriting: What examples of heroism or friendship are found in this episode? List them and then identify the one that best represents what the word means to you. Why is that your choice? What do the others lack? Discuss.

Writing: In your introduction, interest your reader in looking at the concept of heroism or friendship. In the body, indicate what heroism or friendship is and what it isn't. Use examples from the episode as well as examples from your personal experience for support. Conclude with a reflection on the importance of this concept in the life of your reader.

4. Essay of classification using the characters or plots and subplots on "St. Elsewhere" as the basis for your classification.

Prewriting: List personality attributes of the staff members featured in this episode. Then, identify a basis for classifying them, i.e. dedication to profession, personality types, professional attitude, etc. Discuss.

Writing: In your introduction, present the basis for your classification of the characters and its significance. In the body, discuss each class in a separate paragraph, using illustrations from the program for support. The conclusion should reflect on what the viewer might expect, given these characters, in future episodes.

5. Persuasive essay using an episode from "Quincy" on a female alcoholic

pathologist. Using facts and situations presented on this program and supplemented by library research, write a paper in which you persuade a person who needs treatment or a person related to someone who needs treatment to seek it.

Prewriting: Using the program and library material as your sources, list important facts about substance abuse, its impact on the victim and those close to him/her.

Writing: In your introduction, describe an incident from the program to catch your reader's interest, and follow it with a key question or statement. In the body, present your information persuasively. Your conclusion should provide an emotional appeal.

**What are the advantages I discovered in using TV as text and context for writing?**

First, as I mentioned earlier, the less motivated writers are drawn into the class discussion, and frequently they become both resources of information and involved indirectly in the larger task of writing about the content they have helped us to clarify. Second, no one says, "I don't have anything to write about." The content of students' writing is provided and in a highly accessible form. Non-readers in the class are not at the disadvantage they experience when classroom writing is based on a written text. The non-readers' struggle is not with what they will write about, but how. Third, they write because something that is interesting in their personal lives is brought into the classroom; they are involved in the educational task at hand, in the specific course objectives.

Fourth, since I share the viewing experience with students, I am able to help them clarify ambiguous references in the writings that I might otherwise fail to understand. Fifth, because visual material is our subject matter, I am able to place emphasis on concrete detail and examples--things I have had difficulty eliciting from students in the past. Sixth, since students can consult classmates to verify facts, such as names, places, etc., they are more accurate in their writing and enjoy taking the time to verify their accuracy. There is much more sharing of information among students in the writing process than I have noticed in the past. They can do for each other what they formerly depended on me to do for them.

Seventh, and perhaps the most exciting outcome of this work is the sense of novelty and innovation which my students and I share; nobody has done this assignment before. I don't come to my students with preconceived notions about what they or I should say. It is an exciting, new, a one time experience, and we all come to it pretty much on the same level of understanding. I am learning with the students about a powerful influence in all our lives. These are powerful advantages to a teacher of writing. Finally, I am able to address my primary goals: to teach students to think critically through writing, and in their writing to explore values.

I found that writing about their TV viewing experience, using specific analytical tools, brought my students' values and those of their culture to consciousness, making them available for discussion and evaluation. For both my students and myself the composition classroom became a forum for critical thinking about the information and values that shape the quality of our lives.