

RELATE TO WRITING

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AN APPROACH

How do you feel about teaching writing skills? Before you flip the page, let me share with you some thoughts on the subject.

If you feel negative and insecure about teaching writing, your students will probably catch on very quickly and reject the whole prospect of writing in English as futile. You will then be depriving them of a wholesome, self-fulfilling experience. For the rewards are many when the writing skills class is presented in a scenario which is achievement-oriented. Within this framework, goals are set and met. Feelings of failure are replaced by an awakened sense of potential. Passive learners become active. And they glow with the change. Teachers, heretofore drugged into noncreativity by the red-scratch syndrome, can become revitalized by doing a turn-about. How? Simply by PLUSSING acceptable work and MINUSING the non-acceptable. By so doing, you will bolster the self-esteem of your learners. And THAT'S what it is all about.

THE TOPIC

How do you relate to the writing skill? Do you relate to a well-turned phrase? To a well-structured sentence? To spelling and punctuation? To content? Do you consider a learner's goal? A learner's needs? (academic, social, business) A learner's limitations? Why is the learner in your class? Ask. Ask each one of your students why she or he is in the writing skills class. Find out who your students are. Business persons? College students? Career people? Housewives? On the first class day have your class write on the following theme: What My Goal Is. Tell them to feel at ease about how and what they write as it will not be graded. This will establish as quickly as possible a non-threatening teacher relationship.

To write we must have a thought. To express that thought, we must think again. To prove our thought worthy, we must write it down in such a way that another may understand what we are trying to communicate. Writing is self-expository, self-revealing. How awesome! A naked revelation of innermost thoughts! A wisp of truth held and then released for others to condone, or, alas, condemn. Let us break the barriers and release the waves of self-esteem in our learners. For it is self-esteem that enhances a person's motivating mechanisms.

When was the last time you told a student how good you thought he or she was? And did you make him or her feel you really meant it?

Giving a learner a verbal or a written PLUS is far healthier and more stimulating to his level of acquisition than indicating everything that is wrong with that learner's performance.

Read each student's piece on GOALS. Note the word READ. Do not (repeat) do not correct. Do write in a specific comment, such as:
 GOOD WORK - HOPE THIS COURSE HELPS YOUR NEEDS - LET'S GET TO WORK - YOU SHOW PROMISE - YOU HAVE A NICE STYLE - I WANT YOU TO DO LOTS OF WORK FOR ME - WHAT A GOOD MIND YOU HAVE. NOW, LET'S PUT THOSE IDEAS INTO SMOOTHER ENGLISH. So, let's do it.

Reading through these short pieces will give you your perspective as to the needs of the group. You will then be able to adjust your program accordingly. Whether your learners function at a basic or more advanced level of writing competence, certain teaching attitudes can be incorporated as your mainstay. The following have worked well for me.

Whether the course objectives are geared towards achieving competence in writing a paragraph or a full composition, the students should keep a personal record of their progress. That is, students are asked to keep a Progress Sheet where they will record teacher comments, type of assignment, and underlined items. The underlined items comprise actual errors in the assignment which were underlined by the teacher. The teacher does not write in the corrections for faulty structure. The student analyzes the underlined items until he or she can correctly ascertain how to correct the mistake. It is advisable for the teacher to place a PLUS sign on the margin next to all acceptable sentences. That is, the teacher gives positive reinforcement to a well-written sentence or phrase. Error correction is left up to the responsibility and scholarship of the student. If, after reasonable scrutiny, the learner is unable to discern wherein the mistake lies, he or she may consult with the teacher. The student then writes (on a different sheet of loose-leaf) the corrected version of each of the underlined items in the original version. This underlined items assignment is handed in. At this point the instructor may choose to follow the PLUS - MINUS method or pencil in a correction here and there. Underlined items should not run over five or six per assignment. How can corrections be kept down so low?

GUIDED or controlled composition must be the keyword, especially at the elementary level. Skill acquisition in writing involves attaining control over rhetorical devices. A TOPIC or central idea must be established. The writer has to keep to the point and avoid deviating from said central idea. The supporting ideas (or body of the composition) should be presented in logical sequence.

And the total effect summed up in a final conclusion or closing thought. Completeness, unity, order, and coherence are the four features to look for in a paragraph.

The subject matter to follow will be concerned primarily with the skills involved in paragraph structure. They may well be applied to longer compositions, however.

Topics to be written about must be stringently supervised by the instructor. That is, care must be exercised in holding the student's central idea to a specific rather than a general topic. Monitoring topic-restriction should be the first concern.

Note, for example, that such subjects as: Catholicism, Marriage, Nature, Love, etc. are extremely wide and, therefore, not appropriate matter for one paragraph. Such topics may be subdivided into related sections. Blocking a broad topic into all its possible compartments becomes then one of the priorities in teaching writing skills not to be overlooked.

NATURE

COLORS IN NATURE
FLOWERS
TREES
AIR
THE SEA
CLIMATE
FOUR SEASONS
INSECTS

After the topic has been narrowed down to a specific focus area, the writer must give his endeavor a title.

TITLES may often reflect originality, humor, or a simple label of fact. Consider the topic: Weight-loss: Special Diets.

Possible TITLES:

Lose Weight

Stay Happy

Fat is Ugly

Weight-Watchers

Keep it off Forever

OUTLINE

OUTLINING can be one of the most important writing skills your students learn.

Before handing in the finished product, the writer should submit to you an OUTLINE of his paragraph or composition. Once the restricted topic has been decided upon by both teacher and learner, scanning the OUTLINE should be a matter of seconds. Simply place a checkmark on the paper to show the student that he has the go-ahead to write his piece.

A simple OUTLINE may look something like this:

NAME:
DATE:
SUBJECT:

OUTLINE
FOR
PARAGRAPH I

TOPIC: Weight-Loss: Special Diets.

TITLE: KEEP IT OFF FOREVER

TOPIC SENTENCE: A low-fat high-protein diet has proven to be one of the most effective in taking and keeping off those unwanted pounds.

(Having the topic sentence included is optional. But I have found that checking the topic sentence before the final draft is completed saves time and assures the student of getting off to a good start.)

- SUPPORTING IDEA A: definition of protein
- a) protein food sources
 - b) daily protein requirements
- SUPPORTING IDEA B: what is meant by "low-fat"
- a) controlling intake of fatty foods
 - b) sources of fat
- SUPPORTING IDEA C: explain how carbohydrate intake must be controlled and eating habits changed forever in order to keep off the excess weight
- a) carbohydrate food sources

CONCLUSION: personal thought, opinion, summing up.

TOPIC SENTENCE

Except for the topic sentence, the Outline is comprised of short phrases and ideas. These chief points are later developed into fullblown sentences.

The TOPIC SENTENCE, however, is the leading idea in the paragraph. It precludes careful planning. It embodies the central idea of the entire piece following. It contains the key words that tell the reader what to expect.

It is then essential that the instructor guide the writing of the topic sentence. The student must learn how to evaluate his (or her) own topic sentence. His topic sentence must be put to the test via the outline. Structure, main thought, and style must be handled with dexterity and foresight. It is at this point that the instructor interjects his (or her) expertise and intuition in guiding the learner towards an achievable goal.

BODY

Once the topic sentence has been composed, the ensuing bulk or BODY of the paragraph usually falls smoothly into place.

The framework of the paragraph may take any of the following forms. These are the traditional classifications:

NARRATION	=	telling of a series of events or happenings
DESCRIPTION	=	depicting (as in a painting) a person, place, or thing
EXPOSITION	=	most commonly used form of writing; explaining something, process, definition, "how-to", etc.
ARGUMENT	=	expressing opinions, critiques, book reviews, pro-con, etc.

The CONCLUDING IDEA may be a very subjective, personal opinion, or summary of what the writer has stated previously.

CONCLUSION:

By eating lots of protein, little fat, and very small amounts of carbohydrates, you will become healthier, stronger, and much, much lovelier.

In a five-hour a week program it is possible to assign one outline and paragraph per week. Students should be required to keep all assignments neatly in a folder.

Spelling and punctuation errors may be circled or pencilled in with the correction. Be sure to advise the class of the correcting codes you will be using. Insist on neatness. All assignments should carry the proper headings, proper indentation, adequate margins (sides, top, and bottom), and be written in ink. It is highly advisable that most work be done in class.

SUPPLEMENTARY TECHNIQUES

A command of sentence structure can be achieved by exercising accuracy rather than by repeating inaccurate patterns. This is why it is recommended that correct patterns be lauded or plussed, and that a low-key attitude be maintained by the instructor in "correcting."

The most important teaching objective here is that the student write correctly the first time.

Competence in handling sentence structure can be developed by interlaying certain other manipulative activities with the afore mentioned paragraph (or composition) objectives.

Exposing a student to good writing is, of course, fundamental to an appreciation of the art. So it is that reading good literature gives one a sense, or feeling, for the written patterns. A student who would improve his writing skills would do well to read widely.

IMITATION of model paragraphs (controlled writing) is next on the list of options that may be used as supplementary activities. Conscious control over simple mechanics is a good exercise in discipline. These model paragraphs may be selected from a multitude of sources, but should be geared to the needs of the class. For example, certain grammar points may require special focusing. Third person "s" forms, adjective placement, relative clauses, word-order, and numerous other points can be zeroed in on by substituting certain features in the model passage.

For example: Instructions to the class may be to rewrite the entire passage but to change the plural "They" to the singular "He" every time it occurs in the model. Adjective enrichment may develop by having the student rewrite the passage but substituting all adjectives with near-synonyms.

Note the following taken from 10 STEPS by Gay Brookes and Jean Withrow.

EXCERPT:

- 1 Movies are my idea of great entertainment.
- 2 I can sit in an unlit theater for long hours.
- 3 I'm comfortable looking at a screen.
- 4 Being an observer rather than a participant is my style of recreation.
- 5 In my opinion, films are our best educators today.
- 6 They can make a dream-world seem real to us.
- 7 They are one of the best ways to learn about life.
- 8 To my way of thinking, a good movie is a better teacher than a human being.

Instructions:

Rewrite the passage, but change the following words: change unlit to dark in sentence 2; change observer to spectator, and change participant to actor in sentence 4; change dream to far-away in sentence 6; and change good to interesting in sentence 8.

The underlined items in the student's original work indicate some of the structural inaccuracies which need work. Extra re-write assignments should be given in these cases. Checking for accuracy in regard to the manipulation (or substitution) asked for does not take much of your time. This type of exercise does raise awareness in the student as to wherein his "minus" performance lies and how to tackle the problem.

Model passages serve as a handy reference for students to pinpoint their error proclivity. They also aid in showing the writer how to enlarge upon basic sentence frames. Expanding basic sentence patterns so that they become more meaningful and original may be an achievable goal. Before attainment of such a goal, however, basic English sentence patterns should be reviewed.

¹ Brookes, Gay & Withrow, Jean; 10 Steps, Language Innovations, Inc. New York

Often a student may study the underlined items in his original passage and not be able to identify what the mistake actually is. In such cases where inaccurate handling of sentence patterns is the problem, it is advisable to refer to the pattern in question. The student then applies the pattern to his own sentence, thus making the correction himself. Additional practice in said pattern may be obtained by having the student write 3 or 4 different sentences using the pattern again. This assignment can be easily spot-checked in class.

NINE BASIC SENTENCE PATTERNS have been clearly defined by Wishon and Burke in their text Let's Write English. I usually give my students this outline and include my own sample sentences. Each teacher can develop pertinent exercises for homework or class work. However, it is highly advisable that students do most original work in class.

<u>PATTERN</u>	<u>STRUCTURE</u>	<u>SAMPLE SENTENCE</u>
1	Noun + Verb	Bruce works.
2	Noun + Verb + Adverb (or prepositional phrase)	He works hard. He works at a cannery.
3	Noun + Verb + Noun (Noun substitute)	Kathy teaches American Literature.
4	Noun + Verb + Noun + Noun	The teacher assigned the students a composition.
5	Noun + Verb + Noun + Noun (or Adjective)	The committee named Kathy chairperson. The lawyer believed the man innocent. (Adjective)
6	Noun + Linking Verb + Noun	John became a priest.
7	Noun + Linking Verb + Adj. or Noun + Linking Verb + Adv. or prepositional phrase.	Lemon sherbet tastes tangy. Kathy is in San Francisco.
8	There + LV + Noun + Adv. or prepositional phrase	There were many people at the party.

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It + LV + Adj, Adv., Noun or prepositional phrase. It is warm.

NEATNESS on paper must be required at all times. An essential part of good rhetoric is that the written page present a clean, neat appearance to the eye. This should be considered in the total evaluation. All informal essays, short compositions, expository writing, and pattern sentence exercises ought to be done on large, lined looseleaf paper. Margins should be clearly delineated (an inch to an inch and a half). This means - top, bottom, and sides. Remind your students that a well-ordered paper reflects a well-ordered mind.

On the final draft which is handed in some SPELLING errors might appear. These can be circled. Your students should be familiar with the marking code you use so that when they see a circled word, they will identify it as a spelling minus. Punctuation can be handled similarly, except that run-on sentences should be minused, that is, underlined.

Let me stress that it is detrimental for the student to be allowed to do most of the assignments at home. Short assignments should be done in class. Longer work may be completed at home. But the outline and rough draft should be tackled in class.

THE DICTO-COMP is another useful technique for developing good writing skills.

The Dicto-Comp³ is a short paragraph which the teacher reads to the class several times. The objective here is for the students to try and re-write or re-construct the paragraph, keeping to the original as closely as possible. The wording used is to be the same as that of the text. The sequence of ideas is to be organized in the same order as that of the original. Check the papers for accuracy in structure and meaning. Do not write in corrections. The original may be written on the board subsequently. Evaluate the papers thus: GOOD, FAIR, and so on. If a paper is extremely poor, have the student copy the original passage a couple of times. Dicto-Comps are very challenging to the student. They should be incorporated into class activities at least once a week.

2. Burke, Julia M. & Wislon, George E. LET'S WRITE ENGLISH. American Book Co. New York. 1968.

3 "Dicto-Comp" P. M. Riley, English in New Guinea, November of 1970, reprinted in Forum, Volume 13 No. 3, 1975.

— For beginners it might be helpful to put some key-words on the board so that they may follow these clues in their re-write.

A Dicto-Comp can be taken from any longer piece of writing. It can be on any topic. The following is an example of a dicto-comp. I have underlined possible key-words.

Whatever the reason for the letter, the key is always the same: be natural, and let our letters reflect who and what we are. A letter full of dashes, underlinings and true emotions means more than a carefully edited, stilted piece that sounds like someone else. We should let go when we write letters. If it's bad news or unhappy feelings that we're communicating, we should always keep in mind who will be reading the letter and what THEIR reaction will be. Just as we sometimes closely watch what we say, we must also be careful of what we write. Although honesty is always the best policy, there's no need to get someone upset more than is necessary. So, if we must send bad news, we should temper it with the lighter side of the story... and perhaps pictures or stationery that lets our friends know we're still looking up to brighter things.³

Keywords given may be as few or as many as is required by your particular class.

Exploring all the alternatives in any endeavor is fun and rewarding. An activity that delves into psychological as well as rhetorical areas is the last one I am going to mention. It is my favorite. It is referred to as SPONTANEOUS writing. This technique is also used in the speech arts. It is thus referred to as extemporaneous speaking. This simply means that you are asked to speak for a certain length of time on a topic of your choice, or a topic given to you at that time. It is carried out without any preparation whatsoever. Spontaneous Writing holds to this same tenet. Without preparation. Write about anything that comes to mind. Put pen to paper and let it all come out.

Before going on with this activity, students should be told to relax, close their eyes for a few seconds, and write. Write about anything you want to write about. Mention that this work will not be graded or otherwise evaluated. Take the pressure off completely.

If this technique is to be productive, it is very important that no pressure be exerted on the students at this time. The exercise can be done at least once a week. The first period of spontaneous work can be limited to 10 minutes. The next to 20 minutes. It can later develop to writing for "as long as you want." Pick up the papers and read them at your leisure! How revealing they will be.

Some students may be very lengthy, others sparse. Some will tell you about their problems. (Never, never refer to these. Consider this kind of writing a confidence, a trust.) Other students will tell you in about five or six sentences that they really have nothing to say. Of course, the surprise comes when they, themselves, discover they do have something to communicate. And (oh, happiness) some students may even take care to write a neat heading on their papers!

This technique can show the teacher at a glance wherein his (or her) strategies must be directed. Mental notes can be taken of where each student's work has pitfalls. If the class is too large, this technique can define direction. That is, it points out what kind of help your class needs. It will give you the temperature of the class. It will infer to you as to how far your class has come along the long road to becoming better writers in the English language.

CONCLUSION

Let not this be the end of an article, but a beginning to new exploration. It is by re-newal that we become vital. It is through trial and error that we become more expert. And it is by over-writing that some writers can lose their readers. So, don't over-do. Just DO.

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