

Composing Strategies Instruction

As we have seen, composing is an enormously complex process encompassing many different activities. Effective writers are ones who have learned, by trial and error mainly, to balance and control their attention so that the activities occur in harmony. However, young writers often do not have options to choose from when they run into trouble, and they haven't yet learned to control the activities. For many of them, it is as if every activity is fighting for their attention all at the same time.

While we do not want writers to have the impression that if they do things in a certain order all of their problems will be solved, we can break down the process and focus on activities for instructional purposes. This can be done whether the tasks are student-selected or teacher-designed. However, we need to keep our eyes on the goal of developing independent writers who control the activities for themselves.

Prewriting

One writing activity which has received a great deal of attention, and justifiably so, is prewriting. How does one go about generating ideas for writing? Those who are writers by vocation or habit would probably say that they just think about what they are going to write. Often this is called incubation. For them, everything they see and hear and experience becomes grist for their mental writing mill until it somehow comes together and they begin to write. All of this is done almost unconsciously. Our students probably have no such habits of mind. Very few of them would experience something and mentally tag the memory - good idea for writing. Few of them go around composing stories, poems, and essays in their heads. But they will say things such as "I'm waiting for an idea to hit me" or "This paper worked because I've been thinking about the topic for a long time."

Prewriting strategies are ways to get started, activate memory, or take action when inspiration fails. Often, teachers devise prewriting activities for their assignments. Students generally write better papers as a result. However, students also need to learn some general strategies that they can use when the teacher doesn't provide any. After all, during most of their lives, no one is going to be there to provide prewriting exercises.

One of the most effective ways to teach prewriting strategies, as well as many other composing strategies, is to model the strategy for the students. To do this, you can use the chalkboard or the overhead projector. Explain that what you are going to do is to open your mind to students and let them hear how you think about writing when you are faced with a writing task. Then proceed to demonstrate how to create a jot list or a cluster about a particular topic or select the who, what, when, where, why, and how for a news article or the start of a short story. State everything that you think as you do this, including bad ideas and why you discard them and temporary ideas that you don't really like but which might lead to a better idea. Explain why you jump from one idea to another if you can and state the train of word associations that you follow. Ask yourself questions. After you finish generating ideas, you can then explain how you go about selecting one to start your writing while you keep the list for further reference or maybe add to it if the idea you chose doesn't work very well. Once you have modeled this for students, you can also have students model at the chalkboard or overhead for other students. If students are young, you may need to write for them, but they should explain or show where the words go.

Another effective approach is to have students use their journals to practice a variety of prewriting strategies. Let them choose a topic. Show them how to cluster and then let them do one as their journal entry for the day. The next day have them try a free write for 3 to 5 minutes in their journals. The next day do a jot list, followed by cubing the day after that and so on until students have tried 5 or 6 different strategies. Discuss how these can be used for different topics.

Whenever the opportunity arises, ask students where they got their writing topics or ideas. Encourage them to ask each other this question. Students need to hear about the strategies their peers use. This will add to their store of possibilities.

Once students have practiced several different strategies, discuss with the class or with individuals in conference when particular strategies are most likely to be helpful. Clustering, for example, may not be the best way to develop a short story. The 5 W's and 1 H may work better. The point is that students need to know several strategies so that when their old standby strategy won't work, they have a choice of several others.

Drafting

For some writers, drafting means writing and that is the only way to go about it. Those writers have to start with the first word, first sentence, and first paragraph. But students often are absolutely blocked by openings. They know in advance what they want to say in the middle or even at the end, but they cannot think of a way to begin. What a difference it makes when students are told that they may start anywhere in the piece and anywhere on the paper! They can always go back and create the beginning later; they don't have to start with word one. This is only one of many drafting strategies which can be recommended to students. You and your students will probably discover many more ideas once you start to share suggestions and things you have tried.

One of the most important ways that you can facilitate drafting is to provide a variety of materials for students to use, especially typewriters and/or computers. Even if you prefer that final papers be handwritten, rough drafting

on some mechanical device may help some students become more fluent. Another possibility is to have students begin drafting by talking about how they think they want to put their ideas on paper. Yet another is to let them tape record their thoughts before and while they draft so that good ideas won't be lost before they can be noted in writing.

The most important factor related to teaching drafting strategies is to encourage diversity. Often teachers consider drafting as a time of silence, marred only by the scratching of pen on paper. Probably that is not the image we should have of an effective drafting session. We probably need to make provisions for those students who need to draft aloud but quietly while also providing for those who need to draft in silence. Perhaps we need to allow students some choices of location when they draft.

Revising

Now we come to the really challenging task<revising. There has probably been more research done on revising than on any other part of the composing process. What we know is that effective writers see revision as central. To them, it

literally is an opportunity to re-vision in the sense of seeing the material as if for the first time and reshaping it to achieve the writer's goals. The effective writer generally sees the first draft as one of many; the novice writer often considers the first draft as the only one. To inexperienced writers, revising means correcting mistakes and recopying neatly at most. This may in part be due to school writing situations wherein students have been required to produce a finished piece the first time or wherein a rough and a final draft are required in a limited amount of time. Thus, part of the lack of revision in student writing probably stems from past experiences and from a lack of understanding of what revision means. Of course, some lack of revising is due to the fact that revision is difficult and demanding. There is evidence from research, however, which suggests that students see revision as a waste of time, and the data verify their opinion. When middle school writers know they are expected to revise and make every effort to do so, the papers they produce are no better than the originals and in many cases they are worse. Often, they find themselves in the frustrating position of being, able to find a problem without having even a clue as to how to fix it. Indeed, telling students to revise their work without helping them learn how to do so may well be one reason students learn to dislike writing.

There are many strategies which students can be taught to use independently. However, one of the most important things a teacher can do is to convince students that extensive revising is common practice among professional writers. One of the most effective ways to do this is to show students multiple drafts of published work. Occasionally these appear in articles and in some textbooks. If you cannot find any suitable examples from familiar authors, another possibility is to share some of your own drafting. You can also do some revising on the overhead projector as you talk about your thoughts and decisions.

In general, experts argue against skill-drill and dummy run practices. However, there is room for experimentation and discovery. Often this can be done via journal work. Students can be asked to write a brief piece of discourse, which they then manipulate in a variety of ways. It can be rewritten from another point of view. It can be addressed to a different audience. The mode can be changed. The tone can be shifted and the style altered. Simply having students perform these exercises will be of little value unless there is some discussion of the activities as well. Another possibility is to give students an uncued sentence combining exercise which they complete. Results are then shared and compared. Through questioning, other possibilities can be explored as well. Of course, the teacher must emphasize the link between these practices and the students' own writing. Further, revising must be emphasized in one-to-one conferences which revolve around the student's work.

While there are many strategies students can learn to use independently, response groups which share aid as well as pinpoint problems can be quite beneficial. Also, teacher-writer conferences held while students revise can be instructive. However, the involvement of others has a danger. While suggestions from others can be very useful, they can also threaten the writer's ownership of the paper. To many students, the minute the teacher or another student places a mark on the paper, personal ownership ceases and motivation dies. There are several ways to get around this. One recommendation is that a teacher never have a writing implement in hand when conferring with a student writer, but that may be going a bit too far. At the very least, the teacher ought to ask for the student's permission before marking on the paper.

One common problem which occurs in response groups and even teacher-writer conferences is that editing begins too early. Rather than focusing on content,

organization, purpose, and other revision concerns, respondents often begin to point out mechanical problems of misspelling, usage, punctuation, and so on. One of the best ways to avoid this problem is to encourage writers to read their papers orally rather than pass them around. Most problems which require revision can be heard; most mechanical problems become evident only when the writing is seen.

Editing

And now to editing. Editing, or rather lack of it, is one of the most common failings of student writers, according to teachers. Before considering editing further, consider this question: On average, what percentage of words do students misspell on a normal paper? 20%? 10%? 5%? Probably they spell correctly 90% or more of the words they use. Would that be a B or an A on the grading scale? How about sentences? What percentage are clear and complete most of the time? Now, another question. Have you ever worked very hard on a paper, edited it carefully, and later discovered one or more flagrant and unmissable mistakes?

The fact is that no matter how carefully students edit, errors will remain. Further, the more students experiment with language, take risks, and stretch themselves, the more likely they are to make mistakes. They need praise for their effort and an explanation of what they don't know, but they don't need a reprimand for an error which actually represents growth. The easiest way to avoid making an error is to avoid trying anything new. Young writers will tell you that they don't use dialogue because they don't know how to punctuate it without making mistakes or they don't use certain words because they can't spell them.

Editing should be a learning experience, not an embarrassing revelation of writer ignorance. If we as teachers begin with the notion that errors are opportunities for teaching and learning and that we expect writers to make errors on every piece except those that are polished and ready for publication, students may be freed from a concern that prevents them from writing their best.

Observations of student problems provide opportunities for choosing mini-lesson topics. Often the kinds of errors which become evident in editing can quickly be addressed in a 5 minute lesson taught to a small group or even the whole class.

Editing is the appropriate time for exchanging papers since most editing problems can be seen but not heard. When it comes to editing, most teachers have fewer reservations about marking on a student draft as long as the writer doesn't consider it a final copy. Having elementary and middle school students do something concrete to the papers of others helps both the reader and the writer. For example, they can exchange papers and draw a heavy, dark slash mark after every end punctuation mark. Large gaps often indicate run-ons or comma splices. They can use a highlighter pen or a red felt tip pen to mark every capital letter. This forces the reader to consider whether or not capitalization is needed. Students can also highlight or circle every punctuation mark. Again concentration and action helps pinpoint problems. Often the writer can see his/her own problems just from what others mark even though no mistakes have been identified. What's more, once students mark other papers, they began to mark their own and find their own problems. No doubt you will discover other techniques that work even better.

Sharing Publishing

And last, we come to sharing or publishing. As a general rule, researchers ignore this factor except when it relates to goal-setting. Nevertheless, public sharing does necessitate certain decisions and may also require some special skills. Use of pictures or illustrations, use of manuscript or cursive writing, use of non-standard writing implements, choice of cover material or binding technique, oral presentation of written work (i.e., performance of a script) <all of these and more come into play when the student wants to publish the work. If the work is to be submitted to outside sources, certain rules and regulations must be followed. Reshaping the material for professional publication can be a learning experience.

While there are no specific strategies to teach students, varying the publication type can insure that students encounter many different challenges. You might consider opportunities such as "Peanut Butter Press" in the Indianapolis News or magazines which commonly publish student work. [Note added by Forrest Houlette: Write Environment, Inc., will publish student work on its web page. E-mail me for details at Forrest_WE@msn.com.]

In considering what composing strategies to teach, the key is timing. Students need not know all of the strategies for each part of the process, but they need to know enough to help them over the rough spots. The most effective teacher will be one who can offer the best option at the time when the writer needs it most. Having students write just to practice various composing strategies which have been taught to the whole class may be neither efficient nor effective. However, if students engage in writing in an environment where sharing and cooperation are encouraged, students can teach each other strategies they have found to be effective as a natural part of composing.

One additional point concerning composing strategies deserves emphasis. Not every paper that students write should be revised, edited, and polished. Occasionally a first draft really is an outstanding piece of work as is. Some writing should be done just for the fun of it and some should be just for the understanding which happens through writing. Observation notes for a science project would be one example of a writing task which serves a learning purpose. Requiring that these notes be revised, edited, and polished will not further the aim of recording what happens. Rarely should journal work be revised, edited, or polished although an occasional entry ought to serve as an initial draft that is developed into a final piece. Students may find that some papers are worth revising, but not worth editing. This is often the case when students are experimenting with new forms. They may create a satisfactory piece through revising but recognize that the product really is not very good, or they may be so tired of working with the piece that they cannot attend to it any longer. Other students may write a personal discourse which they revise and edit, but which they choose not to share with an audience. Demanding that every piece of writing be revised, edited, and polished for publication cuts down on the amount of writing students have time to do. If students are to gain control of the composing processes and strategies, they also need opportunities to judge when to employ all or only some of those processes and strategies. They also need the chance to evaluate their own work and decide whether or not the piece is worth continued effort.

Recommended Further Reading:

* Elbow, P. (1981). *Writing with power*. NY: Oxford University Press.

- * Faigley, L., & Witte, S. (1981). Analyzing revision. *College Composition and Communication*, 32 (4), 400-414.
- * King, L. & Stovall, D. (1992). *Classroom publishing: A practical guide to enhancing student literacy*. Hillsboro, OR: Blue Heron Publishing.
- * Lane, B. (1993). *After the end: Teaching and learning creative revision*. Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann.
- * Murray, D. (1991). *The craft of revision*. Fort Worth, TX: Holt, Rinehart, & Winston, Inc.
- * Parry, J., & Hornsby, D. (1985). *Write-on: A conference approach to writing*. Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann.
- * Stanford, G., & Smith, M. (1977). *A Guidebook for teaching composition*. Boston, MA: Allyn and Bacon, Inc.
- * Walker, L. (1981). *Visions & revisions: A handbook for creative writing*. Palo Alto, CA: Peek Publications.
- * Willis, M. (1993). *Deep revision: A guide for teachers, students, and other writers*. NY: Teachers & Writers Collaborative.