# The Write Stuff

# Some Observations and Recommendations

BY RAY OSTRANDER

***Teachers feel insecure about writing and therefore hesitate to teach it because their own skills are weak.***

- "I don't know how to write."
- "I hate writing!"
- "Oh, no! Not another paper!"

That litany reflects the frustration and fear students have shared when I asked about their writing instruction. Some students complained of excessive correction: "My English teacher would bleed red ink all over the paper. There were so many marks and comments that I couldn't understand what to do or where to start." Others responded to past put-downs: "My junior English teacher used overheads of our papers as examples of what not to do." Another was devastated when her teacher read her paper out loud, ending with sarcastic comments about its overall quality.

Many saw no reason for their writing assignments; they considered them busy work. "We wrote as a way to use up the rest of the class period." Others saw no connection between their assignments and learning to write. Even worse, some students indicated that they seldom did any substantive writing, since most of their workbooks and homework assignments required only short-phrase responses. Only a few said that they enjoyed writing and appreciated having teachers who facilitated the composition process.

**Contributing Factors**

Oddly enough, teachers themselves contribute to student alienation from writing. A vast majority of teachers:

- do not feel comfortable teaching writing,
- have not adapted appropriate writing skills and methodologies,
- are afraid of giving up the control that comes with fixed writing assignments,
- approach classroom writing instruction with quick-fix exercises rather than a philosophical and pedagogical foundation on which to build and develop learning,
- have not kept current with professional trends and training, or
- possess a combination of these factors.

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How do teachers feel about writing instruction? I have heard a number of reactions—either singly or in combination:

- Teachers feel insecure about writing and therefore hesitate to teach it because their own skills are weak.
- They unwittingly hold inappropriately high standards for their students, thus squelching learning through excessive criticism.
- In an effort to encourage good writers, they praise any type of writing without providing substantial assessment, thus unwittingly encouraging mediocrity.
- They resist change, teaching only what they know, and fail to grow professionally.

One must also consider elementary teachers in multigrade schools. They are expected to be competent in all disciplines. However, some may not have well-developed language-arts skills. They often get little feedback or assistance from conference supervisors or superintendents, many of whom have a poor understanding of writing pedagogy themselves. And finally, since multigrade teachers often lack a qualified substitute-teacher pool, they can rarely participate in professional development workshops.

### National Trends

Low writing performance is not a local, isolated, or recent phenomenon. Following are statistics from a U.S. Department of Education study.[1] This study is the most recent of a series replicated every other year since 1984 to examine academic achievement. During this time, the researchers surveyed more than 180,000 fourth, eighth, and 11th graders. They found that:

- The average writing scores for 11th graders show an overall pattern of declining performance between 1984 and 1996.
- The average writing score of eighth graders has fluctuated, reaching a low point in 1990 and rebounding in 1992.
- There was no consistent pattern of increases or decreases across the assessments, and the 1996 average score for these students did not differ significantly from that of their counterparts in 1984.
- No significant changes were observed in fourth-grade students' average writing scores from 1984 to 1996.
- Students' attitudes toward writing grew increasingly negative as they progressed through their school experience. This trend has appeared in each study since 1984. In 1996, 42 percent of 11th graders viewed writing negatively, compared to 26 percent of fourth graders.
- Most students left high school without ever having written a substantive essay.

Public school students in grades four and

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eight consistently performed below the level of their contemporaries in private schools.

- White students performed better than their Afro-American and Hispanic counterparts.
- Females outperformed males.

This report stated that, in general, U.S. students could write at a minimal level of competence, but could not express themselves well enough to ensure that their writing would accomplish its intended purpose. Researchers concluded that the writing curriculum in all schools needed an overhaul.

### One Approach to Systematic Writing Instruction

The following approach, based on the work of well-founded research,[2] is flexible, inexpensive, does not require a language-arts specialist, and actively promotes student choices. How does this approach work?

1. *Create an environment.* Teachers must create an environment that is as appropriate for writing as an easel is for oil painting. This context demands time, ownership, and response.

2. *Schedule time.* Student writers need time in regular, frequent chunks that they can count on, anticipate, and plan for. Given sufficient time, students can develop the habits of writers. A number of researchers recommend allotting a minimum of at least three 45- to 60-minute class periods each week. Students also need time to rehearse their writing outside the classroom as well as discover and develop appropriate topics.[3]

Most adults—even teachers—are not great at writing first drafts. However, given time to rethink, seek peer responses, and revise, almost anyone can produce something readable. The additional time allows a writer to get the words right. Hemingway revised his conclusion to *A Farewell to Arms* 39 times.

Writing growth comes slowly, even when students write every day. However, "regular, frequent time for writing means regular, frequent occasions for teaching and learning more about writing."[4] Therefore, as students write throughout the year, teachers can teach new skills one at a time. They can encourage students to try different styles, topics, skills, and formats. Reflection develops critical thinking, listening, and response skills.[5]

3. *Facilitate Writing Ownership.* Arrange a special room for student writers' needs and convenience. This room should have books, magazines, and newspapers, and a bulletin board with poems, riddles, newspaper and magazine clippings, class pictures, and writing ideas. These are not only a potential source of writing ideas; they also help shape classroom climate.

This classroom should also contain computers and printers, different kinds of paper; containers filled with markers, pens, pencils, calligraphy pens, and rulers; cans of paper clips and tacks; a stapler and staple remover; scissors and tape; a date stamp and ink pad; boxes of stationery and envelopes; plenty of correction fluid; and collections of writers' resources and references, including dictionaries, spellers, a thesaurus, English-usage handbooks, lettering stencils, bookbinding materials, and contact paper—in short, everything writers need in their profession. Each student also needs two folders—one for work in progress and another with drafts and notes about writing ideas.

In one corner of the room, arrange some desks to enable writers to work with their backs to the room, a signal that they do not want to be disturbed. At the center of the room, group desks so the teacher can walk about and conference with individual students as they write. This is where students will do most of their writing. When a student

wants to conference with another student, he or she moves to one of the remaining three corners or to a designated *conference corner*. The front of the classroom is used for five- to 15-minute mini-lessons. Here skills can be introduced or reinforced and writings shared.

File cabinets hold permanent writing folders, filed alphabetically for easy retrieval. Stack trays contain student writing in various stages: writing to be edited, writing to be photocopied, and writing for conferencing.

An environment like this helps students to feel a sense of ownership in their writing because they are freer to experiment and initiate ideas, rather than depending on a teacher to dole out assigned topics.

4. *Promote reading and writing.* Both the NAEP achievement data and a compilation by Heller[6] confirm the relationship between reading and writing. Better readers are better writers. Often, especially in the early grades, writing ideas come from reading. Therefore, students should have daily access to a wide variety of books, magazines, and newspapers featuring varied styles and levels of writing.

5. *Promote encouraging response.* Carolyn Chute, a high school dropout, wrote her first novel, *The Beans of Egypt, Maine*, at the age of 37. She had been writing since the age of 8, but never took any of her writings to school to show her teachers. Atwell related her sad, but not atypical, story:

*My stories were so precious to me; I didn't want my teachers to touch them, because everything I ever did in school was attacked by them. I even had a nightmare when I was an adult that my home economics teacher was ripping all my stories up and throwing them around.*[7]

That's a tragic commentary. All writing has an element of vulnerability, especially student writing. A good writing teacher would encourage the student to press on. Students "need response while the words are churning out, in the midst of the messy, tentative act of drafting meaning. And they need to be able to anticipate and predict the teacher's approach."[8]

***Writers are not born. They are made, and teachers can contribute to this.***

### Teacher's Role in Promoting Writing

What should a teacher do to promote student writing?

1. Introduce students to the terminology of writing from the very beginning: *draft, revise, topic, conference, response, audience, dialog, edit, cut and paste, insert, delete.*

2. Be a model for writing—not exotic and extraordinary productions, but stories about everyday life.

3. Respond promptly. Delayed feedback comes too late to do much good. Comments need to be specific and constructive.

4. Have frequent face-to-face conferences. Such meetings create student confidence in teachers and promote better implementation of shared ideas. Learning to wait and listen is critical, as the writer becomes the focus. The teacher reflects on what the student writer is saying by summarizing, paraphrasing, or restating the writer's intent. If this summary does not correspond to what the student intended, he or she will need to revise the paper.

Teachers also tend to be drawn to errors. While it is necessary to address editing errors, wait until the student has submitted the finished paper.

5. Create a safe environment. Students cannot be allowed to talk down to or to belittle one another. Peer conferences will not work unless writers feel secure enough to share their work. Therefore, the teacher must show students how to confer by initiating, modeling, and periodically reinforcing appropriate response procedures.

### Conclusion

Writers are not born. They are made, and teachers can contribute to this. By taking time, providing stimulating experiences, giving encouraging ideas, spotting talents and promoting them in students, and just being good listeners and sharers, teachers can do much to take the fear out of writing. Writing teachers need to model what they expect from their students. They are not responsible for their students' writing, but for their students. Finally, point your students to a statement of Epictetus in 100 B.C.: "If you want to succeed in writing: write." ✐

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3. Atwell (1987), p. 55. See also Graves (1983); *Writing: Teachers and Children at Work*; and D. H. Graves; *A Fresh Look at Writing* (Portsmouth: Heineman, 1995); and Tompkins.

4. Atwell (1987), p. 56.

5. Heller.

6. Ibid.

7. Quoted by Atwell, p. 66.

8. Ibid.