Many parts of the Bible, the best-selling book of all time, were written down by men called scribes. Their role was to record, word for word, the orally expressed thoughts of other men whom we traditionally think of as the “real authors” of the books. After having taken quite a few essay examinations, I can empathize with these scribes because I’ve experienced the aching and sometimes even swollen hands that can come from too much hurried writing.

And yet, I do not think that these scribes worked harder than men such as Paul or Jeremiah. The difference between these two groups of “writers” is that one group did all the thinking. Although God provided the inspiration and the ideas, the authors had to find the right words. This activity of the mind is the true reason why we credit this group with the traditional title of “author.” You see, real writers are thinkers.

There was a time when education emphasized rote memorization and repetition. Now, best-practices research stresses teaching students to think. Unfortunately, at a time when ideas are zooming through cyberspace, it is difficult to teach students to slow down and think. However, there is hope. One of
the methods that has been shown to be most effective in teaching students to think is teacher modeling. In order to teach students to think, teachers must, themselves, be thinkers. Since writers must be thinkers, it seems when teaching writing, teachers must also teach thinking. And to teach writing well, the teacher must model the whole process.

To model writing, one must also live like a writer and a thinker. This fact brings us to an important question: How do writers live? To be a writer, one must reflectively read, thoughtfully experience, and enthusiastically write.

**Reflective Reading**

One example of the importance of reflective reading may be found in the writings of Gary Paulsen, author of several Newbery Honor books, such as *Hatchet* and *Dogsong.* Paulsen admits, in the introduction to *Shelf Life,* to becoming an avid reader at an early age. A book handed to him by a librarian apparently inspired him, and he subsequently spent many hours in his basement reading book after book; and even today, he has not stopped reading.

Reading is enabling. If a student (or teacher) fails to read, it will be difficult for him or her to write well. Authors, including young authors, must develop a repertoire of writing skills that will draw the readers’ eyes and ears to the page.

As they reflect on the variety of techniques used by other writers, authors must be intentional in making decisions about which ones to use in order to engage readers. Simply hearing the verbal expression of a language does not enable a person to grasp all the nuances and richness of language. To write well, an author must understand proper grammar and the concept of formal versus informal language.

Preparing to teach, I read as much as I can. I read newspapers, magazines, children’s books, and adult literature. I read stories of the imagination as well as information. I read poetry and the lyrics to music. I look for patterns and unfamiliar words. I find the Bible to be a fascinating display of the amazingly diverse styles of different authors who shared a common purpose in writing.

**Thoughtful Experiencing**

Reading is important, but an author who only reads and fails to get out and live life richly is not likely to write engaging literature. The life of author Gary Paulsen provides an excellent illustration of this point. By looking at the kinds of books he writes, one can see that he does not just enjoy reading; he is a passionate outdoorsman. How could an author write thrilling survival tales of human beings battling the elements if he or she had not experienced the struggle to survive? Paulsen definitely had such experiences. In fact, he participated in the famous 1,200-mile dogsled race, the Iditarod, not once, but twice! How could such experiences not influence his writing, making it more breathtaking and real for the reader?

To be certain, not all teachers are designed to experience life in ways that others may not. For example, I enjoy reading different genres that highlight other cultures. This helps me to learn about them in an interesting way, rather than consulting a list of habits and ways of life for a specific culture. In a story, a culture comes alive, and something that may not have seemed very attractive becomes more appealing as I experience it vicariously.

Because I want to encourage students to explore the world around them and to try new things, I try new things. I free rock climb, although I am afraid of heights. I jet ski, although I cannot swim well. I travel to other countries and try combinations of foods that make me gag just from the sound of them. One of these reasons I do these things is that I desire to model to my students the importance of stepping out of their comfort zone and doing something new. For some of them, this may be as simple as talking to the child who sits next to them in class, but it will still be a new experience. In order to write well, you must live well, and I want my students to really live.

**Enthusiastic Writing**

It may sound simplistic to say that in order to write well, one must write enthusiastically, but it is an important point. Ask any published author, and he or she will describe writing for hours every day. Writing requires discipline. As the age-old adage says, “Practice makes perfect”—or in modern-day terms, “Practice makes permanent.”

But it’s not enough to just tell students that they need to write. Students need to learn how writers acquire ideas. They need to know what authors do when they have writer’s block or experience other difficulties in the writing process. Many writers keep some type of notebook to record the events of their lives, or in the world around them. These events can furnish ideas for writing. Notebooks also are a good place to record the details that enrich one’s writing. Most authors use their notebooks as a safe place to reflect on what they have read and experienced.
But journaling in a notebook is not the only type of writing that writers do. Every song lyric or work of literature had to start somewhere. This is another significant use of a writing notebook. It is here that many writers simply doodle, make sketches and charts, or draft stories or poems.

Journaling and sketching are only the beginning of the writing process. Writers often reread the notebook, looking for ideas that have potential among the sketches, ideas, and doodles. Then the labor begins. And labor it is. Revising and editing are key components of writing. When the topic deals with something the author cares about, he or she is willing, even eager, to return to the work again and again. The author looks for ways to make the writing better through crafting, editing, and presentation techniques.

Realistically, as a teacher, I am not likely to write for hours on a daily basis. However, I can model for my students the process required to produce quality writing. I can show them the problems that I am having with a poem I am trying to write. I can describe my thinking as I try to find ways to solve the problem. To write, I must work hard, and they must see my work as well as understand the thinking behind the work. I cannot expect my students to be motivated to do something that I am not willing to do.

The best-selling book of all time teaches me that Jesus, the Master Teacher, was my example. Jesus lived the life that He expects me to live. He does not ask me to go through anything that He did not willingly go through Himself. If I follow His example when I teach writing, I must set a goal—to live like a writer—and model for my students how to achieve important goals. I am an imperfect person, and I will make mistakes. But, praying for God’s help, I will do my best to motivate my students to write and think as I model reflective reading, thoughtful experiencing, and enthusiastic writing.

REFERENCES


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