"WHADDYA DO IN ENGLISH?"

SARAH BAYNE

"What do you do in English?" goes the question.
"Oh, right now we're on direct objects."
"Do you write stories or comps or anything like that?"
"Well, sometimes we write sentences when we have to use spelling words or write topic sentences. I never *did understand what those were.*"
"And what do you read?"
"We read stuff out of the big lit book. We read the thing and answer the questions at the end of it. Hey, what was that Beowulf guy all about, anyway?"
"When's the last time you wrote anything?"
"Well, I write notes to my friend Heather all the time. Oh, and I wrote a neat horror story once in the third grade. But the teacher told me I hadn't followed the directions right. *I* liked it, though. I wonder why we can't do that anymore."

Current research over the past ten years holds that this conversation could be heard in the majority of schools in this country. Kids aren't writing anymore, at all. They take English, but that English is usage, grammar, skills books, and drill. The writing they care about is on bathroom walls, and passed on scrap paper between and during classes. At every convention are exhibited newer, flashier and ever more alluring ways to teach skills and avoid writing, to box it up as a skill with outlining and taking notes. From one ditto sheet after another, we ask children to get excited about grammar and usage. It's like asking a basketball team to spend the entire season doing pushups. Somehow we feel, school boards and parents tell us, we must teach English this way. Any other way, we say deep down, we can't tell where children are, we can't evaluate them effectively, we can't tell where they are on standardized tests.

Sarah Bayne is a teacher of writing, literature, and history at Orchard Country Day School in Indianapolis, Indiana.

As teachers of English we are all concerned with writing or literacy in some respect. We write volumes about it, worry about it, fight about it, year after year. It is very hard to do well. Many of us teach English to as many as 150 children a day. With a teaching load such as this, it is perhaps cruel to suggest that we assign 2 or 3 page compositions weekly, for us to correct. This single factor alone seems to be a strong force preventing teachers from giving children chances to write. Yet common sense tells us this simple truth: IF CHILDREN ARE TO BECOME GOOD READERS AND WRITERS, THEY MUST IN FACT READ AND WRITE A LOT.

The foundation of one approach, used on levels ranging from fifth grade through freshman college composition, is the once-a-week composition, augmented by the following: writing in class twice a week, one period a week for peer criticism and listening, silent literature and outside reading consistently assigned, and finally, (and most importantly) individual editing with each child.

There isn't the time, you say. There *is* the time, especially for reading work aloud and spending time, if only briefly, with each child. The value of time for sharing writing is immeasurable, as those of you know who have tried it. Kids enjoy it, and the reader benefits from the feedback and criticism, at times far more than from you as adult. You hear things you have trouble believing ever were said — "Gee, Richie, you've really improved over your last story," "This comp is fine, but it's missing a strong ending. What happens to the dog?," or "I really like that long part describing the woods." There is a commitment to the process of writing that can occur when an entire group becomes involved in it and supports it. This becomes a place where you aren't afraid to write, and someone cares about what you say.

Most of us assign compositions at some point during the year. The essential difference in this approach, however, is its very regularity. Every week, (just like clockwork, the kids groan) a composition is assigned and due, at least two drafts worth. "I can't possibly do that every week!" they complain in September. But the more they write, the easier it gets for them to approach an assignment and the more they learn about writing — writing about topics which grab them and those which don't as well. For ten year olds or high school level students, the system is the same — a writing assignment given on Monday, due on Friday. I am strict about ensuring that work is not late.

Choice of composition topics should ideally grow out of the needs and concerns and daily life in the classroom, and make a progression throughout the year in level of difficulty. As Philip Lopate tells us, "I am appalled to realize that the number of creative writing assignments is as infinite as things in the world."[1] You as teacher are always the best judge of whether a topic choice is right for your class at a certain time. Topics suggested here were natural outgrowths of stories read aloud or together, discussion in history, literature, current events, or even peer problems within the group. We *must* use the same standards with children in our choices, however, both of topics for writing and reading as well, as we would for ourselves. If we want them to write in a way that allows them to reflect deeply on relationships, on themselves, to analyze ideas thoughtfully and synthesize carefully, we *must* assign topics which excite them into attempting that. What topic would excite *you* into devoting two or more hours of your time preparing? It's like those kit programmed bulletin boards in many classrooms, on Spring and Thanksgiving. Do they appeal to you? "It is not impossible," says Bettleheim in his *Atlantic* article on reading "to teach children to read [and write] while respecting their intelligence and dignity."[2]

Most years I spend much of the fall months reading short autobiographical stories about childhood, many marvelous ones by black writers, many hilarious or tragic. At the end kids write about experiences of their own that somehow changed them. Results, as always with any group of chronologically similar children, vary. Some are quick to open up and use the page as an extension of themselves; others don't know how to and don't trust the process. There can be enormous maturational differences in children's ability to deal in the abstract, we now know, and to consider concepts. Keeping that in mind should not prevent us from assigning those topics; it should make us interpret the results better.

I use photography a great deal, not only as a source for brainstorming ideas in class, but also as foundations for quite long pieces written at home. Depression era photography tells many stories in faces, and has produced fine results. Assignments are open ended, though I sometimes ask for a paragraph description of the photo before allowing them to launch into a story. I use photography, all kinds, for

topics because I care about it so much. I am certain kids can tell that when it's assigned.

Story starters are developing a bad name, probably from overuse. They are also an easy way for teachers to avoid thinking and students to avoid coping with their own beginnings, often the hardest part in writing. Beginnings that I use, perhaps three times in the year, are actual entering paragraphs from short stories. One of the most successful with adolescents came from Saroyan's "The Coldest Winter Since 1854":

> It was very cold the year I broke a ligament in my right leg and fell in love with soft-eyed brown haired angel-on-earth Emma Haines.[3]

Part of the interest in the assignments comes in finding out later what the original story had said, compared to their own. Comparisons are often favorable to the student! Other topics come up as they suggest themselves. Hundreds of source books abound with suggestions for writing topics, but watch out — many are deadly. We must help children through our topics, to use writing as a viable form for critical cognitive thinking. One can begin argument and persuasion in a humorous vein, for example, rather than in a stolid one, before tackling the essay. The techniques necessary for proving a point are the same whether the issue is funny or boring. Prove that hanging by your heels is good for brain power, that women are smarter, $2+2=5$. Ability to write about concepts like racism, hunger, freedom, varies enormously. They can be excellent assignments, however, as can political ones (gun control, abortion) as long as we are aware of how broad in spectrum the results can be, and give individual help in preparation, if only a few minutes. Children have valid opinions (unlike what my 9th grade teacher once said: "You're too young to have any opinions") and part of the process must be to express them convincingly to others. Writing about feelings can be quite different, and more approachable once the atmosphere of trust exists in the classroom. Learning how to write about feelings is one of the most important things a teacher can foster. For if we believe that writing is the focal point of being in school, as one teacher told me, then being able to identify feelings and beliefs and touch them for yourself and communicate them on paper to others is essential. If we don't learn to write about them, then all of those things which we *each* have are lost to us.

For some classes, the use of the journal has been a successful and important tool, for removing fear of the blank page and creating awareness of the personal uses of writing. Though its use has become somewhat controversial, its strengths far outweigh any weaknesses for me. At present, I have a ninth grade student who is using the journal to write a gothic novel (of gargantuan length), another who is writing a lurid story of sin and corruption in New York City, another who writes every bit of gossip heard in the halls or on the phone (helps to keep me aware of what's going on), another who uses a "writing to think" style which helps her sort out ideas in history, all the way to problems with her parents. The important thing about journals is to do them — regularly — and you as teacher must read them regularly and return them on time. It is not necessary, and in many cases it is unadvisable, to comment in someone's journal, or to correct what's been written. If comments are asked for, write on a separate piece of paper and insert in the journal, leaving the student a permanent record of his own writing, not your comments or criticism. Journals aren't meant to be diaries, but they can be. They aren't meant to contain discussions of the relative strengths of one brand of snow-mobile over another, but they could. As Dr. Strahl of IUPUI suggests, "Journals are a way of moving ideas from the unconscious to a personal statement."[4] Whatever methods or styles you may take with your students in order to achieve this, as long as something is produced, the journal is successful.

Writing in class is often the only writing experience that children have in school. Though it is understandable why this occurs, if we do not ask homework of children, we never give them a chance to learn to work on their own, plan their time, develop self-discipline and, most importantly, find an alternative to television. What do most children do in the evenings? Watch television. What do must adults do, (even us) say the statistics? Watch television. Let's require reading that will take them away from the monotony and violence that is television's daily fare, and allow them to do their own visualizing and imagining — not NBC's. Don't give up at the beginning of the year because the work doesn't come in when it's assigned. Keep at it. One 6th grade teacher threw up her hands in the teacher's room last year and said, "I'm not going to assign any more homework! No one does it!" I say even the small amount you receive at the start, and it will

increase, will be better than the 45th evening of Atari, reruns, and *Magnum P.I.*.

Writing in class, as it works with the weekly composition, therefore, is mostly fun and often very funny. You need not spend an entire period on this if you are pressed for time. Sometimes ten minutes at the beginning or end is a good break to the lit discussion you've been having. Writing in class should be relaxed, not chaotic, with much sharing and laughter about the results afterwards. The physical closeness — all of you bending over the same paper or idea — is invaluable to the writing process. Exciting openers of longer pieces often emerge from these exercises but they don't have to. Games of this sort[5] are not time-wasters. Most English games, even on the upper high school level, cannot be considered of lesser value simply because they're fun. Writing in class can give kids a sense of pleasure in what they produce with ease on the blank page, thus making the lonely time of starting a comp at home easier.

Kids write for us, not for themselves, says the research. "Whaddidigetonmycomp — did I write what you wanted me to?" is the constant question. "Did you write something you felt good about? Did *you* like it?" is the answer. Most of the writing we presently ask of kids, apparently, is not personal, but informational, and usually in no greater than paragraph form. We ask them to summarize material already presented in order to test what they've learned, to force them to use new vocabulary words, or as a way to teach them structures we think they need to know — the paragraph, the five paragraph theme, the topic sentence, the outline. Whatever happened to reason and logic? When do we give them chances to work ideas out and synthesize them on paper? Writing is still our best measurement of thinking, but we reward nonthinking in writing, over and over again. Short answer tests on usage, numbered topic sentences, multiple choice tests in literature and history, *instead* of essays which really ask students to think about what they've read and heard and to take a stand, don't do this. Writing can teach this, if we don't saddle English classes with grammar and composition structures that fill hours of class time. The Elley and Harris studies of 1976 have reported that although grammar study was proven conclusively ineffective in teaching writing, still a healthy portion of time (sometimes over half of the English/Literature curriculum) was taken up doing it.[6] Students who do well in traditional grammar classes are

probably those who didn't need to take the course at all. They read and write well enough to have picked up grammar structure and conventions without rote exercises and structure. Those who fail grammar classes are those who have trouble reading and writing, and no amount of drill and the 75th exercise on the quotation mark is going to teach it to them or shove it down their throats. "I give up," said a grammar teacher to me. "I've taught *its* and *it's* to Eileen and Jim in 15 different exercises and they can get the exercises done perfectly and make the same mistakes over and over again in their own writing. What can I do?" The answer, quite clearly, is that the Eileens and Jims need to approach those problems through their own writing. Find the weaknesses, and deal with them there, over and over perhaps, but within the context of their wanting themselves and their ideas to be understood, not *Warriner's* p. 354. We *must,* above all else, remember that the teaching of grammar is not the same as the teaching of writing. Lots of present English teachers today appear to have enjoyed grammar as a child. Most kids today don't. If you must teach grammar, teach it through games. These remove practice from endless dittoes, and the same skills are honed and learned in a more approachable and interesting fashion. Grammar teaching should be fun, fast, and over quickly. Make grammar classes on the secondary level at least an elective option for those who can test out of it, leaving room for actual writing. Work with words in class, explore sentence structure, evaluate it in individual writing, but do avoid those workbooks and painstakingly constructed exercises that take time away from children's chances to write.

Without all the fuss and expensive published material, kids can end up writing perfectly organized five paragraph themes simply by finding they needed careful organization in order for their ideas to come across well to the reader. There's Tommy, the 11 year old, writing an essay about busing, well defended, three pages, two drafts, who never heard of a topic sentence. There's an academically weak ninth grader, writing a succinct essay about abortion, finding that in order for her points to come clear to the reader she had to organize her paper, point by point. The sense of order demanded by presenting a point of view carefully required that structure and it was used, naturally. Both students were writing about topics which involved them.

This kind of seemingly non-directive approach does not

mean that there is no guidance or instruction from teachers. It goes on all the time, individually and to the group. Kids help each other a lot; we talk about writing, take it apart, work on each other's, read it aloud. We work on mechanics, spelling, usage, and structure — *all the time.* But the main place where this occurs is in evaluation of writing.

I set up a period a week, or every other week, for working on writing individually — an editing period. Other kids are writing something in class, or reading. It *is* possible to sit with every student in an average-sized class in two periods. For some, it might take as little as five minutes to go over writing, for others more. In the past, I have done half the class one week, the other half, the next. Sometimes, if I am behind in working on kids' writing, I have more than two compositions to go over with them and discuss. Of itself, this is an excellent plan to allow comparison, recognize weaknesses common to many papers, and review each child's progress. Working on strengths and weaknesses can be done in person, right then, with this system. Many things are taken care of in this way. The obvious one is that at-home correcting time is cut drastically. Secondly, the personal contact between teacher and student is invaluable. Very often one ends up discovering trouble at home, the dog having puppies, the mother's anger, at the same time the writing is discussed. The trust relationship has been established. We aren't asking less of children with this system. We are asking more, but making it possible for them to produce it. Children greatly need to know what we *thought* of their work — not whether it's good or bad, because it's probably neither. This is the central problem with grading writing, especially by points. As Sylvia Ashton Warner says[7] "In Australia, we grade meat, not children." What did you think about what they wrote? Did you laugh? Were you bored, confused, lost, thrilled? What worked well in it? Why? What did it need? We can make these comments on paper, sometimes most successfully, but that can be impossibly time-consuming. Apparently teachers tend to read for mechanical errors and little else. A teacher next to me in the teacher's room gleefully pointed to a paper she had finished grading. "Look at all that red!" she exclaimed. The theory behind the constant use of her red marker was that those who have their mistakes pointed out to them will a) be eager to correct those mistakes and b) never make those mistakes again. I haven't met many students who fit into

either category. For all their hard work, teachers tend to produce papers that look as if they've been trampled on by cleated boots and a class of children who feel the same way. We end up with the conscientious child (the one who succeeds in grammar, and everywhere) obsessed with form, and the technically weak becoming discouraged and giving up altogether.

This system of evaluation doesn't work. It doesn't teach kids to write; it doesn't teach usage effectively. It turns many kids off totally, and it takes too much teacher time. The most frequent solution is to avoid asking them to write altogether, or to box up writing in text format. *Don't do it!* Try the weekly composition with the editing period. Mechanics and structure can be discussed with far greater results in person than in circling errors in red at home, for the 90th time. The personal contact has great value as well. Children begin to believe that you care about what they produce, that their peers do as well, and trust exists.

Herbert Kohl says, "There is no more deadly thing a teacher can do than ignore what a child is trying to express in his writing and comment merely on form, neatness and heading."[8] There is no more deadly thing than assigning only form, neatness, and heading and expecting only those in return. It is only when we stop to listen to what children are saying on paper, and trust them to do so; it is only when we stop picking and start helping them to get at their own thoughts and feelings and reasons; that children can begin to say in writing what is in their very fine minds, and say it better.

NOTES

[1]Philip Lopate, *Whole Word Catalogue,* Teachers & Writers Collaborative (New York: McGraw Hill, 1982), p. 38.

[2]Bruno Bettleheim, "Why Children Don't Like to Read," *The Atlantic Monthly* (November 1982), p. 30.

[3]William Saroyan, "The Coldest Winter Since 1854," in *Man in the Fictional Mode,* ed. Haupt (Evanston: McDougal Littell, 1971), p. 37.

[4]In a fall workshop for the faculty of Orchard Country Day School.

[5]Arthur Goddard & Abraham Hurwitz, *Games to Improve Your Child's English* (New York: Simon & Shuster, 1973).

[6]W. B. Elley, I. H. Barham, H. Lamb, M. Wyllie, *The Role of Grammar in a Secondary School Curriculum* (Wellington: The New Zealand Council for Educational Research, 1979), pp. 8-10, citing R. J. Harris, "An Experimental Inquiry into the Function and Value of Formal Grammar in Teaching English," Ph.D. dissertation, University of London, 1962.

[7]Sylvia Ashton Warner, as quoted in a position paper for National Association of Independent Schools' Task Force, 1975.

[8]Herbert Kohl, "Teaching the Unteachable," a pamphlet published by the *New York Review of Books* (1967), p. 21.