

# WRITING: A LINE OF REASONING

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By the seventh grade, most students have learned that writing is hard work. Many have given up. Having absorbed the conventional wisdom “good writers are born, not made,” these students seem to feel that if writing doesn’t come easily, then they cannot write. But a few have not given up. Like the athlete who is taught “the more difficult the goal, the harder you work,” they seem to thrive on the challenge posed by writing. They too know that writing is not *easy*, yet they still write—their fluency giving the appearance of ease. Why do the few succeed in meeting the writing challenge while most don’t even try? Part of the answer lies in the students’ attitude toward writing. The *can-do* writer believes himself an expert on his topic, and he is in command of his thinking and writing processes.

Since the traditional occupation of school has been teaching for content mastery, we teachers already possess a repertoire of plans for facilitating student expertise with subject matter. This is not true for the second attribute of *can-do* writers. Process awareness is a new paradigm. Rodrigues bemoans the fact that teachers don’t have the pedagogy for teaching process. The thinking-writing processes are thinker-writer unique. They cannot be taught with methods designed to produce conformity as in the mastery of specific facts or the computation of scientific formulas. Recognizing the importance of respecting individual differences, Hagaman warns teachers not to interfere in a student’s writing process until that process is understood and areas needing instruction identified. However, neither the teaching of a standardized process nor interference with a student’s natural processes is necessary for the development of a good attitude. Awareness of personal processes and the ability to evoke various strategies embedded within those processes build the confidence required to persevere—the commitment required to write well.

Process awareness, or metacognition, is the knowing what you know and how you know it. Research suggests that students who talk about their thinking processes and strategies enhance their ability to think (Whimbey, Bloom and Broder). Paulo Freire's work in Brazil indicates that metacognition is effective in developing positive attitudes toward writing, too. He observed his adult students writing "confidently, . . . largely overcoming the natural indecisiveness of beginners . . ." Freire attributes this ease to philosophical discussions during which the students "discovered themselves to be more fully human, thereby acquiring an increasing emotional confidence in their learning which was reflected in their motor activity" (55). Helping students acquire can-do attitudes means teaching and practicing metacognition. Students who write with ease are writers who have discovered they know what they want to say and how to say it. Teachers of writing help construct positive attitudes by beginning with discussions of how students know a specific answer is right, then developing reasoning strategies to use with similar cases in times of doubt. At the same time, discussions of how the writer has developed a successful piece helps him to repeat the success. The talk helps students develop strategies for monitoring their writing processes at times when they are apprehensive about a new piece's effectiveness. This routine builds emotional confidence in one's ability to write. A writer discovers himself *more fully human*, when armed with a *focal awareness* (Polanyi) of his unique processes. Therefore, communities of writers, who write with ease, evolve from classrooms alive with students constructing positive attitudes through discussions focused on the when's and how's of thinking and writing skills.

The composing of the above *line of reasoning* took months. Even with a focal awareness on my writing process, the only *ease* I found was the comfort of knowing I had something to say and a belief that I could find a way of saying it. Still, many of you readers are thinking, "Her theory is easier said than done," and your *line of reasoning* might be—

"Emphasis on standardized test questions has taught our students to be sloppy thinkers (Applebee, Brown, Cooper and others). Often these types of test questions require only the most elementary forms of behavior: *something is remembered* (Vygotsky, 51). Even questions crafted to evoke higher levels of thinking won't guarantee thought above the memory level if there is only one

correct response (Costa). Likewise, writers whose confidence in their thinking begins and ends with recall, cannot engage in *real authoring* which requires divergent thinking (Moffett).

"Scantron sheets returned with a letter grade at the top do little to bolster a student's belief in his mastery of content. Neither do they foster discovery of self as a thinking being. Primary reliance on multiple choice, true/false and short answer responses increase writers' anxiety because objective tests do not exercise skills in seeing patterns in content or in making connections between patterns necessary for writing with ease."

My rejoinder—

Basal reading series usually have sets of section tests composed of questions on which teachers are to base judgments about their successes in teaching identified skill lessons or their students' level of mastery of those sets of skills. These tests are designed for the teacher. They are not meant to be learning experiences for the students. We classroom teachers, however, can turn selected tests of this type into meaningful confidence building exercises by converting them to lessons teaching about thinking.

After the first few weeks of school, I administer the pretest for the first reading section. Students, used to multiple choice tests by the seventh grade, settle down quickly to marking machine-readable answer sheets.

"What do you want us to do when we're through?" the first to finish asks.

"Hold your test until everyone has completed the assignment," I reply.

Another hand waves at me. I nod recognition. "May I take up the test booklets?"

"No," I respond with a smile. "You'll need them."

Students begin to toss each other puzzled looks, "But we're through?"

"No. You've just begun. Today is Challenge Day."

I ask the students to move into their reading-writing groups, and I give each group an additional blank answer sheet. "Your task is to reach a consensus and prepare one set of answers per group. Everyone's grade depends on the defense the group gives for the answers it chooses. Refer to the answers you gave on your answer sheet. Use your text books, if you wish. Remember everyone in the group will have to be able to defend the group's answers."

Students have little difficulty making judgments about what they read. They respond well to forced-choice decision making, but most students lack the problem solving and critical thinking skills to explain and defend their judgments. The problem isn't so much that students don't know, but that students don't know *how* they know. The first Challenge Day sets the stage for that awakening.

The classroom becomes a hubbub of the question "What'd ya get for . . . ?" The spotlights of students' gazes fall on the one considered to be the group's *best test taker*. Rarely will a text be consulted or the test question reread this first day, for poor thinkers search for certainty and are intolerant of ambiguity (Glatt-horn, Baron). The exercise usually ends with a recopying of one student's answer sheet.

Meanwhile I have projected an overhead of a blank answer sheet and gathered together multiple colored marking pens. "Which group volunteers the answers for test question one?" I ask.

Silence.

I wait.

Cautiously, answers are suggested, and I mark them on the overhead. "Any challenges? Does anyone disagree with these suggested answers?"

Silence.

When I move on to the next section's answers, there is an outcry! The students demand the *right* answers. "Do you disagree with what's on the screen?" I ask, and watch a handful of nodding heads reply. I extract from the dissenters their challenges and record them in contrasting colors next to the initial response.

Before the ink dries, cries of 'Uh un-n-n-. That can't be right!' explode, forcing me to hold up my hands and "shhhh" them back to order so that we can hear the arguments.

The debate rages around me, and I feel as though I have created a monster. After several sessions, everyone in class earns an A+ on the year's first reading test. But more important, everyone knows *how he knows* his answers are right. He has listened to himself and his classmates think beyond the mere recall of factual information. At the beginning of every year as I start fresh with a new group of students, I have to remind myself to be patient. The students won't be comfortable thinking about thinking. Often they rebel.

“This is stupid! Just tell us what we have to know to pass!”

Skills are acquired slowly. Frequent guided practice is required to make self-probing a habit. Usually, my perseverance is rewarded before the winter break when students begin bantering, “What’s your line of reasoning?” and “Write about it!” These challenges signify a growing attitude tolerant of ambiguity and students who are sufficiently self-critical to look for alternate possibilities.

I share with you one student’s think writing to the following sample test question.

*This type of literature evolved before printing was invented. The purpose was to pass down values and ways of behaving from generation to generation.*

(a) myth      (b) fable      (c) legend

*My reading-writing group read the text many times and we understand the difference between myth, fable, and legend, but the question is not clear enough to discriminate. The question has two parts: the literature form is older than printing; its purpose was to teach the younger generation.*

*Myth, fable, and legend were all made up long before printing and have continued long after printing.*

*All of the types of literature given as choices teach proper behavior lessons. The fable teaches a lesson, or moral. The myth, also, passes down values and ways of behaving. The example in the book is the myth of how deserts were formed. Certainly the lesson about “obeying authority or you’ll get into trouble” is a way of behaving. The legend teaches patriotism. A value older generations wish for the young.*

*We understand why each answer could be right.*

Thinking about how test questions are answered is a process of knowing which stretches beyond recalling the facts. Writing, too, demands close attention to the process. Flower and Hayes have observed, “Writing is among the most complex of all human mental activities” (33). However, students have been conditioned to *seek the right answer* in writing essays on teacher-assigned topics just as if they were stippling multiple choice answer sheets.

Using a metaphor of a mirror image, Olson depicts a writer moving up and down the stages of Bloom’s Taxonomy of the Cognitive Domain. “Writers must tap their memory to establish what they know, review the information they have generated and

translate it into inner speech of print, organize main ideas, re-see the whole to find a focus, construct a structural framework for communicating an intended message, transform this network of thought into a written paper, and evaluate the product" (102). The stages of the thinking and writing processes Olson describes are not like the front steps leading to the front door of a finished piece of writing. They are more akin to multiple sets of a child's building blocks. The confident writer is aware that he has more than one block, or way, for recalling information, more than one block for reordering, reflecting, and responding. The construction of a thinking-writing task requires this writer to select from his piles of blocks those strategies he deems appropriate. If one technique does not work, another must be selected. Each effort builds on previous work. Therefore, conscious awareness of a story's development, of its *line of reasoning*, builds confidence and enables the writing of the next piece.

"I need help with this!" a student calls as she enters the classroom waving a manuscript in the air. Several students turn from their pre-class tete-a-tetes to form an impromptu group. I return to my own writing, but I can't help over-hearing. "It's my science project paper," she moans. "It just sits there! I read all the sources, took notes, but this sounds just like some old boring encyclopedia."

This student's science project had won *Best In Show* for the school. I was pleased she wanted to revise the written report before the county fair.

"Have you tried putting all your notes away and just writing about it?" one group mate asked.

"That's what this is!" Her voice had none of the confidence one would expect from a science fair winner. Her two friends moved closer, peering at her work.

"I make a list of the facts I want to include in my papers and then let my mind play with the topics till they become ideas," the other group mate suggests as she leans back tapping the desk top with her pen.

"Show me."

"Read your paper while we list the facts you include."

The bell rang, and, no longer concerned with the small group in the corner, I started the class. One dissatisfied writer would be learning a new strategy for regrouping facts to form concepts.

In her learning group, no one would speak with right answer authority. They are a group of individuals questing for a composing strategy that might work for a fellow writer. They are sharing their thinking-writing-building blocks.

Piaget notes that learning occurs during genuine intellectual exchange among equals as in the above dialogue. Teachers, by definition, are not their students' equals, but they can create classroom environments which encourage focal awareness of the processes their students use. Teachers can insist students collect multiple thinking-writing-building blocks by creating lessons focused on the teaching of specific thinking skills. Teachers can demonstrate the importance of metacognition by modeling with their own writing. The best guarantee, however, that students will take process awareness seriously is—the test.

On tests, I give a choice of essay questions. Usually I require the students to choose two of the five suggested topics. Recently I was encouraged to change this form to, "Choose one of the following five suggested topics and for your second essay write the story of your first essay's creation: What did you do or think first?—Which led to. . .?" My line of reasoning for this change is to foster in each student an emotional confidence in his ability to think, in his discovering himself to be *more fully human*.

The following is an example of an essay test taken after the reading of O'Henry's "A Retrieved Reformation." The student chose to answer the following question: The title of this story is a puzzling one, and it raises a rather interesting question. When, in fact, was Jimmy Valentine's reformation "retrieved"? Give reasons for your opinion.

*(The student's answer to the question.)*

*"A Retrieved Reformation" is a puzzling title especially when you look at the definition of "retrieved." It means, got back, recovered, restored. This could mean that, depending on how you look at the story, Jimmy Valentine's reformation was retrieved at two different points.*

*The first point could possibly be when he decided to rescue the little girl. At this point, he took back his reformation. He said to himself, "I guess I'll show my real self. I'll erase my whole reformation."*

*The second possible place in the story is when Ben Price*

passed over Jimmy. This shows the other part of the definition of retrieved. Ben Price restored Jimmy's reformation.

So depending on how you look at the story, and the definition of the word "retrieved," you will see a different point at which Jimmy retrieved his reformation.

*(The student's line of reasoning essay.)*

My thought process in developing my essay was really pretty basic. I first picked question A. I read it over and then scanned for the necessary information. First, I need to read the title "A Retrieved Reformation." I knew a definition of retrieved was given, so I went to that. In that definition, there were contrasting definitions. Depending on which one you understood, would be how you would answer the question. So really, there were two possible answers. I decided to contrast the answers. Really to give both answers with reasoning.

The contrasting words in the definition were "got back" and "restored." Got back, Jimmy would've had to do himself. Restored, someone else could do it. So there were two possible answers.

Students, armed with positive attitudes toward writing developed through a focal awareness of the thinking and writing process, write with the ease required of those who write well.

"True ease in writing comes from art, not chance, As those move easiest who have learned to dance."

*(Pope, 1711).*

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