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## WRITING PROCESS AND TEACHING PROCESS

or, how I work as a writing teacher, paper by paper.

This is a standard part of my syllabi for writing courses. **What I do here is break down the writing of a paper into stages, then discuss what I expect the student to do, and what the student can expect me to do, at each stage.**

The text that follows in regular font (like this) is what I would give to my students.

For faculty, I have added (*in italics*) a commentary that articulates my assumptions, my rationale for various steps, and points about teaching writing in general.

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The following is a way of analyzing writing process into stages, done with the awareness that this is an arbitrary and artificial act. The arbitrariness is the price we pay for some semblance of organization. At each stage I have also indicated the audience that the piece of writing is addressed to, and the way that I typically respond to it as a teacher.

*There are 4 basic assumptions here:*

- 1. Writing is a process and needs to be taught as such.*
- 2. Audience is a critical dimension of writing at all stages, and it is not the same at all stages.*
- 3. My role as a writing teacher, and what kind of feedback students can expect from me, is not the same at all stages of the student's process.*
- 4. If the students know what I think I'm doing with them, it might work better than if they don't.*

1. Free writing. Quick, spontaneous, uncensored, unedited, following thought and feeling where they lead with no concern for a final product.

*About free writing, I always advise students to "follow your thoughts with your pen"; go where the thoughts lead; don't worry about structure, punctuation, spelling. Don't worry about "getting it right," which is a useless concept in the world of free writing. I believe that this kind of writing generates ideas because the internal censor is somewhat relaxed and because language itself requires the generation of sentences. I typically tell students that my own experience of free writing often includes feeling bored with myself and stuck before I hit the good stuff – I encourage them to view that as a normal stage of the work.*

One of the best favors you can do yourself in this course would be to make a regular time for such writing, every day or every few days. If

you keep up a practice of regular free writing, you will find yourself in possession of plenty of subjects to write about.

The audience for a free writing is yourself; I read it as if over your shoulder. I generally comment here only on things I like or find promising.

*This description of free writing may strike you as overly tilted toward "creative writing" (a dubious term that suggests all other courses teach uncreative writing), but I teach it and use it myself as a mode of generating or exploring ideas. For me, it is integral to writing essays.*

*Free writing may be described as a form of meditation: it is a technique for being aware of your own thinking as it happens. Assigning it is essentially an argument for a view of the inner life as not unitary but composed of at least two entities, one of which can watch the other think. I know this is crude terminology for something exceedingly subtle. In my view, the real action in free writing – or in the mind – begins when there starts to be an internal dialogue rather than monologue. Something that goes like this: Wait a minute, what I just wrote there is really confusing and contradictory, it doesn't actually make sense, maybe it would be better to say it this way . . .*

*That way lies a thought.*

*Audience is crucial here. You write free writing for yourself, to clarify your own thoughts to yourself. Not for the teacher or anyone else. But the way we play the game here in school is, you let the teacher read it. The teacher (me), knowing you're writing this for yourself, doesn't try to "correct" or "fix" it – which would be, among other things, both presumptuous and a waste of time. My comments are done in no time: I underline things I like or find interesting, and maybe I write "intriguing" or "cool idea" or some such phrase in the margin. That's it. I hope to find something I can like in every piece of free writing, but that doesn't mean I always do. I try, though.*

*Mainly, free writing gives me an invaluable window into the student's thinking. It gives me an indispensable starting point, a way to find out who I'm working with, a way to begin a **dialogue** (key word).*

*Some people need to write a fair amount of junk before they can say something real or interesting. That is another useful function of free writing.*

*Yes, I understand that it's somewhat disingenuous to say "you write this for yourself," because of course the student cannot help being aware that I'm going to read this. And yes, I'm aware that the term "free writing" itself is a misnomer, if carefully picked apart. But I'm pragmatic: this talk about free writing is a rhetoric that works.*

*To complicate the audience issue further, I do bring free writing, or excerpts from it, into class and share it with the whole group. Students are forewarned that everything is fair game to be shared, unless they tell me otherwise. In general, I try to create, as soon as possible, a handout containing at least a sentence from every student's free writing. Each excerpt is then read aloud by the writer. The goal is to get student writing, and students' actual voices, in front of the group as quickly as possible.*

***Discussing student writing is the #1 priority in my use of class time in a writing course.***

[There is probably some kind of planning here, after free writing and before a draft, but it varies so much from person to person and paper to paper that I don't know how to describe it. Anyway, it may be mostly or entirely unconscious.]

*I once tried to formalize a planning stage and turn it into an assignment to be handed in to me, but I couldn't make it work (due to extreme variation between individuals) so I gave up doing that.*

2. First draft. This looks like an actual paper; it is a trial version of a finished product, written with the understanding that it is there to be revised. It's a test or experiment; if it doesn't work, there is time to rewrite it. The audience for a first draft is no longer confined to oneself; it must attempt to communicate to others – me and the rest of the class, at least. I generally make my most extensive comments on first drafts. I attempt not to provide a recipe for the second draft, but rather to communicate in detail the response of an intelligent reader to your draft. If I can show you where your effort to communicate worked and didn't work – and why – you can presumably derive from this response your own plans for revision. It is at this stage, in particular, where I am likely to ask students to respond to each other's work in pairs or small groups.

*The above paragraph contains a lot of my philosophy of teaching writing in a compressed or implicit form. I will try to hit some of the highlights.*

*I cannot over-emphasize the importance of the words "it must attempt to communicate to others." They sound absurdly basic, but making language carry thought or experience over that gap between self and other is what writing is all about. This is dramatically different from conceiving it as pleasing the teacher, proving one has done the reading, or giving the right answer. Those conceptions of writing, which are commonly reinforced in school, give rise to an erroneous notion of the relationship between writer and reader. One of my first jobs is to get students to address the full difficulty of actually communicating something. At the same time, when one is writing to an interested reader who is NOT reading to refute or correct, there is a kind of satisfaction and reality to writing that students may not have experienced in school. With the difficulty comes a type of enjoyment. I hope.*

*"Written with the understanding that it is there to be revised": this is not an understanding that most students are used to holding when they write. As a student of mine (Kathy Chaurasiya) once said, "revision is an attitude toward writing," and it's an attitude that doesn't come automatically. Writing almost IS revision. It is not easy to let go enough to write with this attitude – especially if writing each sentence comes hard – but for most people, excellent work won't be attained if they don't learn to write a true first draft and then revise it. In the end, it makes writing easier because it removes the burden of trying to get every word right the first time – which, for most of us, is an impossible task. But the*

*impossibility doesn't prevent people from trying to do it and consequently learning that they hate writing. My job is to un-teach that and to teach a new approach.*

*Though, as I just said, learning to write a true first draft makes writing easier **in the end**, the end doesn't come right away and so there is a fair amount of difficulty and resistance to be dealt with during the learning. I think it's my complete belief in this way of working as a writer that makes it a functional way of teaching.*

*Commenting on first drafts is, in my opinion, the most important commenting I do. It is certainly the most work. It only happens a few times a semester. As a teacher, I am fundamentally not very interested in commenting on a finished product. That seems to make little difference in the learning. To the student my comment on a finished piece comes across as "yay" or "boo" but not necessarily as a usefully applicable writing lesson. The point at which I can intervene in a potentially learningful way is **while the writing is in process**, so that the student reads my comments knowing that she is going to write another draft and I am trying to give her some guidance toward a better paper.*

*In the above paragraph I also try to indicate what **kind** of commenting students can expect here. I don't want to correct or fix as much as I want to let them know **what they made me think**. I don't want to say "write this" – which causes reversion to the stance of pleasing the teacher – but rather to get into a dialogue (key word, again). I want the student to remain aware that she has agency, choice, and the ability to make decisions as a writer; hence the words "you can presumably derive from this response your own plans for revision."*

*I try to ask questions that will pull the student toward a closer examination of her emerging thoughts. I want to be in dialogue with the student, obviously, but I am also involved with a third, less obvious party here: the paper that I can imagine this draft becoming.*

[Between first and second draft there is necessarily some kind of reflection – probably a great deal of it. But I don't see this until it somehow eventuates in a . . . ]

3. Second draft. Deliberately building on what has been learned through the steps above. Addressed to a wider audience. At this point I like to consider the paper's substantive revision finished, though students sometimes insist on writing third drafts. I don't necessarily encourage that. Letting go is also a necessary part of the process. Therefore, unless I have agreed with a student that a third draft is absolutely necessary, I seldom make comments at this stage pointing toward further revision. Instead I mainly mark the location of errors in order to facilitate the next step.

*Teaching writing, for me, is teaching revision. Yet part of revision is the ability to stop revising. The above paragraph lays out a sequence of events that I regard as suitable for most assignments, but in all writing courses there are students who start wanting to write yet another draft. Sometimes this is not productive, but sometimes it's exactly what they*

*should be doing and will learn from. I've had students spend a whole semester on one substantial piece of writing, productively. An advanced course is the place for that.*

*In commenting on a second draft as outlined above, I too have to let go. I may have ideas of how the piece could grow, and perhaps nascent strategies for guiding the student in that direction, but I need to put that aside.*

4. Edited version. By editing I do not mean rewriting; I mean the correction of errors in spelling, punctuation, sentence construction, citation, etc. This step could be very easy if you get to it with few errors in your second draft. I believe that unless errors of the above sort actually make earlier drafts hard to understand, it is wise to put off obsessing over mechanics until this stage. On the other hand, because time is allotted specifically for this kind of correction, I expect a finished paper to be almost entirely free of such errors.

*This step, in my outline of process for teaching purposes, consists only of copy-editing. In truth, writing process is always recursive and all stages of the process potentially lead to all others, in any order. But for purposes of organizing a course so that everyone is more or less at the same stage at the same time, it is necessarily to create a useful fiction.*

*Yes, I really do put off dealing with copy-editing problems until this stage, as much as possible. I really do not correct all the mistakes on a first draft. It is a waste of time, and life is too short.*

*The "unless" clause above is significant, however. There are some (a few) cases in which a student's writing is truly hard to understand sentence by sentence, and these are the ones where I have to diverge from what I've outlined above and start at a much more basic level. After receiving such a draft, instead of commenting on developing thoughts or matters of structure and style, I need to sit down with the student individually and go over the parts I don't understand, asking her, "Okay, what does this say? Just tell me in your own words," etc.*

When the paper is edited and therefore finished, I comment on it one last time. In these final comments, which are often short, I respond as a reader (as above) and also as an evaluator and grader. I do not grade anything before the finished product.

*I try to make these final comments short, but being me, I have a hard time living up to that. Nonetheless, I believe in what I said here. The piece is done. Stop trying to guide the writer somewhere. Evaluate it, say what your evaluation is based on, the end.*

*Note, also, that I am constructing the role of "evaluator and grader" as different from that of "reader." Though it isn't truly possible to make such a strict separation, I want to be in the "reader" role most of the time and only step into the "evaluator and grader" role when the piece is done. Again, this is significant because of audience. Writing to a reader is challenge enough; writing to an evaluator and grader guarantees maximum anxiety and seldom improves the end product (to say nothing of how miserable it can make the process).*

5. Publication. By this I mean sharing your work with a public in any way. Even showing a free writing to your roommate may be a kind of publication. Much of what is written in this course will be published to the class – and who knows, maybe to audiences beyond that. Work may be published before it reaches its final draft. If you feel you need to write something which you don't want others to see, be sure to tell me that.

*Here again I emphasize that I'm not the only audience. And that the student will have an audience. The writing will be a transaction with someone, and "someone" is not me alone.*

*I experience essentially no difficulty in setting this ground rule from the start. If students know that's the way the game is going to be played, they deal with it well. I want them to own their own work and put it out there in the public space of the classroom. Everyone finds this nerve-racking at first. Everyone survives. It's a powerfully bonding act.*

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