



Curriculum Units by Fellows of the Yale-New Haven Teachers Institute
1981 Volume IV: Writing Across the Curriculum

Enthusiasm is All Write

Curriculum Unit 81.04.04
by Richard Canalori and Farrell Sandals

Breaking Down the Barriers

Although the theme of this unit is to develop a comprehensive writing program for the sixth grade student, we cannot dismiss the fact that the student's creative writing process has undergone some drastic changes since the days of early elementary education. The lyrics to a Harry Chapin song, "Flowers are Red," underscore this point dramatically. A boy enters grade 1 and begins during art period to draw flowers of all colors: black, orange, purple, brown. When proudly he displays his creation, he is reprimanded by the teacher because in her eyes flowers are red and leaves are green and that's the way it's always been. Despite the boy's protests that *he* wants to use all the colors of the rainbow, the teacher remains steadfast in her belief. The boy is put in a corner until he realizes the truth of his teacher's words. Finally he is able to leave the corner of the room and the results of his drawings are now red flowers with green leaves. They are perfect. The teacher approves and the boy is satisfied. Years go by, and when he reaches third grade, he is asked by another teacher to draw some flowers. When asked why he doesn't use any other colors, the boy replies in essence, that flowers are red and green leaves are green...and that's the way it's always been.

The barriers are forming. The little boy in the story epitomizes the plight of a vast majority of children in our school systems. Children enter school full of wonder and creativity, and by the sixth grade they are seen as apprehensive, cynical, and bored.

In order to chip away at these rigid barriers of creative expression, we must first understand the forces which formed the barriers.

The atmosphere in the classroom is a major step to breaking down the barriers. Atmosphere is not simply lighting, proper ventilation, and colorful bulletin boards, but rather it is a bond of trust between the student and teacher. It is of utmost importance that the student will feel that his writings are acceptable. Ken Macrorie in *Telling Writing* states that older children become less enthusiastic about writing because their writing only serves as a means to please others. The metaphors used become less spontaneous, and the emphasis shifts from what one wants to say to what one feels is necessary to pass. More and more it is the end result which is held in higher esteem rather than the process to achieve this result. The student must be cognizant of the teacher's role in this process.

In the process the student needn't worry about failing a written piece because the written piece is of

diminished importance.

Macrorie emphasizes that “good writing is clear, vigorous, honest and alive.”¹ It is writing to serve people rather than impress them. The student must feel that the teacher is serving his interest, is aware of his strengths and weaknesses, is tuned in to what he has to say. Adults hate the feeling that they’re just a number in life. We feel that the student also deserves a better fate.

The second aspect of breaking down the barriers concerns itself with the actual written piece. It is indeed a rare instance (other than the first two weeks of school) that children are found to have all the necessary tools to accomplish an assignment. Somehow, after the pencils have been sharpened once or after the price tag wears off the notebook, the students are suddenly in disarray. The student enters class totally unprepared. The reason is simple. Perhaps he has never had to organize, and as it is widely believed that writing is an organized approach to communication, how can we expect children to instantly develop an organized process of thinking? Once pen and paper have been found, students automatically begin imposing restrictions on themselves before the topic is even given. “How long does it have to be?” “Does spelling count?” “Does it have to be neat?” Where do they get these restrictions? It’s all part of the barrier.

The final step in breaking down the barrier concerns the students probably more than actually writing the paper. This part of the barrier deals with the paper after it has been handed in. “Are you going to read it out loud?” “Do I have to read it?” “Is it going to be put on the bulletin board?” “I know I’m going to fail!” These questions are part of any sixth grade student’s repertoire. Somewhere along the way you can bet that their papers were read, graded, displayed in some manner which proved humiliating to the student. There has to be an organized, efficient manner of evaluation in which both the student and teacher are directly responsible. Students often feel that the responsibility for *their* creativity lies with the teacher and that their purpose is simply to write something and “hand it in.”

Once a student acknowledges that the papers he writes are an extension of himself, once he realizes he is not being judged, but rather is cooperating in the evaluation of his own unique works, we feel the barriers will begin to crumble.

It surely seems an insurmountable task to crumble barriers that have been years in the making. Yet it *can* be done and it *must* be done. We hope the following pages will provide a means to this end. There are so many barriers that even if we cannot crumble them all at once, we can make a difference as teachers in the attitudes of our students.

Scaling the Barrier

You learn to write by writing. Writing assignments therefore must be clear, frequent, and sequential. What we offer in this section of our paper is a series of activities which begin to build enthusiasm, skill, and confidence in writing. The activities presented may be expanded or changed as needed, but we feel the ideas proposed are a necessary foundation.

The materials one needs to write are a notebook and pen. What appears to be an easy task can be difficult for the student to accomplish. *Every child must have a notebook and pen to be used exclusively for writing* . We feel this is essential. It allows the child to keep assignments together and to see progress throughout the year. It should be the first order of business.

We have experimented with two different types of notebooks and have found success with both. The first type

is a loose-leaf notebook into which all writing can be placed. The advantage of this type of notebook is that it allows children to write at home without bringing all of their previous compositions back and forth to school several times a week. It is imperative that the notebooks remain in school for children often find unusual ways to misplace them. As will be discussed later, this type of notebook affords parents as well as children the opportunity to evaluate the total progress at any given point of the school year. We especially recommend the loose-leaf notebook for the less responsible type of student, although it can be used successfully with any child.

The second method of organization is directed toward the more motivated and prolific writers. Here we suggest one wire-bound notebook from which pages are not removed. The students are allowed to take these notebooks home and create outside of the classroom. Kenneth Koch, in *Wishes, Lies, and Dreams*, suggests the writer finds success in a teacher-directed environment where the teacher can keep the level of enthusiasm from waning. Conversely, we feel the more motivated child may be better able to succeed in a less structured environment outside of school where time restrictions are not so rigid. This method affords the parents the opportunity to discuss and to evaluate with their child the total writing experience at home.

Implementation of these methods of organization can be achieved more successfully if the teacher makes the students and parents aware of where to purchase materials at a lower cost, or if, in fact, the teacher purchases the required materials for the children and is subsequently reimbursed. More often than not, students have paper but no pens. One suggestion to alleviate this problem is that a pen be secured to the writing notebook and that it is to be used exclusively for the creative writing program. What sounds so simple may save your writing program and will certainly save you a lot of headaches.

The following letter, or one like it, may be used to help parents and children better understand the program and to elicit their support.

Dear _____,

This school year, your child will be participating in an exciting, innovative writing program developed last year at the Yale New Haven Teachers institute. In order to insure success in this program, your child is being asked to acquire a notebook and pen that will be used exclusively for this program.

It is important that an exclusive notebook for writing be used for it allows you and your child the opportunity to accurately evaluate the development of basic writing skills throughout the year.

These materials will remain in school so that they can be continually evaluated by the teacher, the parents, and the child. We hope to develop a love of writing within each child, and we further hope that you will want to share this experience with your child by visiting often and by sharing in what your child has written.

In order to purchase the necessary materials, we are asking you to provide \$2.00 for your child. In this way, we will be able to purchase items which we feel are suitable. Thank you.

Sincerely,

All children now having materials, the writing program is ready to begin. For the teacher, the task is to stress that all ideas have merit. Inform the students that they should not write for you, the teacher, but rather they should be honest. The creativity a child possesses should not be replaced by pre-determined ideas about what is correct or incorrect. Trust is essential.

There are very few people who can say that they have finished learning to write or that they have reached a level upon which they cannot improve. This fact should be kept in mind when beginning to develop a writing. What is good writing? Which errors are most important? What is an acceptable rate at which students can gain new skills in writing? These and other questions are very difficult to answer, especially when one considers the various teachers a child will have and the preferences in style each will possess.

Mina Shaughnessy, in her book, *Errors and Expectations*, asks the question, "What is the goal of instruction? is it awareness, improvement, or mastery?"² Such things as learning to spell the "demons" may certainly be taught for mastery while in other areas such as using the active rather than the passive voice, the goal may only be improvement or awareness. Later in this paper, various methods of evaluating writing will be presented. Ideas for developing an appropriate list of errors and expectations for grade six will be presented. What is important is that the teacher not expect a child to achieve perfection in one week or even in one year. What is also important is not that a student's writing be correct (this may be impossible to define) but rather that it improve.

The following activities offer a systematic approach to the implementation of the writing experience. Each activity is one which we have found successful in our classrooms. The time required for each section will be determined by the teacher and may vary according to interest.

Activity 1 Brainstorming

One technique for developing non-judgmental creative expression is Brainstorming. This technique encompasses many forms. By using a simple classroom object, such as a pencil, try to elicit as many different uses as possible from class members. List *all* responses on the blackboard. Emphasize to the children that all responses are valid. Try to get a response from each child.

The goals of such an activity are to stimulate creative ideas and to alleviate inhibition. From this beginning the feeling that ideas have merit will foster enthusiasm and relieve apprehension in the assignments that follow. This technique can be used each time a new writing assignment is given throughout the year.

Activity 2 The Class Poem

Once the class has experienced success in warm-up activities such as Brainstorming, the teacher can build on this success and add enthusiasm by writing a class poem. Each child is once again encouraged to offer a thought on a suggested topic such as "Childhood is...." The responses are listed as lines of poetry beginning with the topic. All suggestions are accepted without regard to rhyme or reason. There is a feeling of sharing, acceptance and accomplishment. The poem is then copied on oak tag to be displayed.

Activity 3 Individual Poems

Activities 1 and 2 should have begun to build trust and mutual acceptance, yet the teacher should be aware of the anxieties children may feel on writing their own first poetry. It is here, most of all, that the teacher must be supportive without being restrictive.

Choose a topic which is both relevant and understandable. As the class has already experienced success in using repetition, this is a good place to begin. Suggested topics for individual poems may be "1 wish..." or "I remember..." We cannot stress too strongly that at this point your main emphasis is on creative development rather than on mechanical mistakes. Upon completion of this activity, a poem both honest and confidence-building has been written. The child does not feel competitive and is reassured that his/her ideas have merit.

As William Zinsser states in *On Writing Well* , “Writing is *not* a contest!!” ³

Some children may require immediate peer reinforcement and may wish to share their writings with their classmates. Time should be provided at the end of each writing period to afford children who wish to share their ideas the opportunity to do so.

Activity 4

This activity enables the child to experiment with various types of poems. Two forms of poetry which may be introduced at this time are the Limerick poem and the Haiku poem. The Limerick uses five lines with lines one, two, and five in rhyme and lines three and four in rhyme.

They are usually silly and fun to do. Example:

There was an old man from Mars
Who often frequented the bars
He didn't know why
He so much loved rye
But he keeps on losing his cars

The Haiku Poem, from Japan, is just three lines in length with five syllables in line one, seven in line two, and five in line three. Example:

A stern silver lake
Shines with the Suns of Morning
As it lays alone.

Activity 5 Oral Conferences

While every teacher feels the restrictions of time, we feel that a 5-10 minute oral writing conference with each child can really help both to understand the child and to learn how he/she writes. Briefly, each child is asked to speak aloud as they write on a topic such as, “How you feel about yourself.” These conferences should be scheduled so as not to interfere with the normal class period. They may be scheduled during preparation periods, before and after school, or, if possible, during part of the lunch hour. While these conferences may be a slight inconvenience, they are a valuable diagnostic tool. The purpose of such an activity is to better understand the thought processes of the child. Questions that the teacher should ask himself or herself include:

1. Is the child apprehensive?
2. Is there any planning or thought before writing?
3. Are the child's thoughts organized?
4. At what rate does the child write?
5. Does the child impose his own restrictions, such as length, neatness, spelling, correct grammar, and grading? Why does the child impose these?
6. Does the child re-read for clarity?

The essential ingredient to these conferences is the sharing of thoughts and ideas between teacher and student in a non-threatening atmosphere. If the child is extremely apprehensive about such a conference, by *no means* cancel it. The child may wish to just talk. A simple conversation may reveal as much or more about how a child thinks and feels as the described activity.

Activity 6 Writing Spontaneously

Ken Macrorie in *Telling Writing* stresses the importance of speaking in "an honest voice." ⁴ To help the child discover this voice, an initial 10-15 minute free writing assignment is proposed. The child is told to write whatever comes into his/her mind. If nothing comes to mind, the student should write "Nothing comes to my mind," until they get started. As Macrorie states, the results of free writing will be good writing because it is honest—the number one prerequisite for good writing. Follow-up free writing assignments are suggested. The teacher may, in later writing sessions, suggest a familiar topic such as "school" upon which to center the writing or have the child choose a topic of their own. The important ingredient at this stage is that the writing be spontaneous.

Activity 7 Exploring the Senses

Walker Gibson, in *Seeing and Writing*, offers examples of just how difficult it is for someone to express their thoughts. He points out that thoughts change with time, place, and mood. Even now as you are reading this activity your frame of mind and what is happening around you or where you are sitting will affect your thoughts. Children in Activity 7 will enjoy learning more about their senses while becoming aware of just how their senses can affect their thoughts and what they write. To approach this topic, have children close their eyes for 10-15 minutes. While their eyes are shut, the children should be thinking about what is happening around them by using their other four senses. After this period of time, the students are asked to write what they experienced. What did they think about? Did what they smelled, touched, heard, or tasted affect what they thought about? The recollections should be as detailed as possible.

Variations of this technique are to explore the senses individually, perhaps by describing a piece of music or by touching a foreign object. Writing for other senses would follow in the same manner.

Activity 8 Play Writing Through interaction

Children love to role-play and this activity offers an experience which will allow children to share ideas with

one another in a common writing while also allowing children the opportunity to act. As with a class poem in which each child offers a line to be included and each line is accepted, the class now has the opportunity to write a play in which each line of dialogue is accepted.

The procedure is simple. The results are fun. The class is divided into groups of four or five. Common characters are chosen by the class for each group to use—the characters are familiar to all (Wonder Woman is a favorite). The teacher then instructs each group member to write down the same opening phrase. The common phrase may be as simple as the word “Wow” or “Look out!” Each group member decides who will say that line on his or her individual sheet and then adds a line to his own sheet which is said by one of the other characters. After ample time to add this line, the teacher instructs the groups to pass their papers simultaneously to the person next to them in their group. This neighboring person adds another line to the sheet handed them. This continues with the sheets continuing to be passed to each group member several times. The group is writing four or five plays which are their own. When the plays are completed after about 20-30 passes, the group then decides which is their best work by voting on one sheet to be performed the following day. The lesson concludes with the performances.

The objectives of this activity are to enjoy writing and to reinforce the peer interacting and sharing of ideas which was fostered in the beginning of the unit. It is also an opportunity for the children to enjoy watching one another perform.

Activity 9 “What would happen if there were no more Kraffels in the World ?”

Immediately the question arises, “What is a Kraffel?” No one is sure. The answer lies in your imagination. Is it spelled correctly? is it capitalized? Where can Kraffels be found—if at all? What affect would be felt if Kraffels were to disappear?

Children will ask questions of this type and soon realize that they must determine the answers. The children are then directed to write a story which answers this question. Since each child begins with the same level of knowledge on the subject, there is no advantage to any child—no point of reference unavailable to them. There are no right or wrong answers and everyone will discover that Kraffels can be many, many things.

Activity 10 The Hijack

Imagine you are going on a class trip and along the route you are commandeered by something—anything. Describe your experience. Include the names of as many of the children in the class as you can.

Variations on this topic are numerous and fun. Children will enjoy writing and sharing their work. They will be enthusiastic. “Enthusiasm is All Write.”

What Do We Write About Next?

Up until this point we have addressed our unit to the breaking down of children’s barriers to writing, but as often as children are perplexed on what to write, teachers are equally perplexed on the topics to be written upon. We all have guaranteed, sure-fire topics for students to enthusiastically delve into, yet the failure of many programs in writing is that once this supply of ideas is exhausted, the program begins to sputter and stall.

It was our intention when planning this unit to provide a comprehensive list from which teachers could get ideas for exciting writing projects. After many lists were compiled, we realized that to provide such a list might

not be as beneficial as was intended.

We firmly believe that the topics list is as individual as the teacher and the class. Some teachers prefer humor or satire, others description, and still others fantasy or realism. If a comprehensive list were developed for all the individual tastes and styles, it would be so expansive that the unit would lose its point of focus. That focus is on the unique relationship of teacher to student.

We have mentioned and will continually emphasize that the program requires a well thought-out sequential plan of development. It is during the planning stage that the teacher can best develop topics that are suited to their individual classes. For example, you may wish to have the students write in mini-units. Perhaps mysteries one month, fantasy another, science fiction another. You must continually monitor assignments to the degree that students are able to successfully complete them. You wouldn't, for instance, give a writing unit on visiting all the planets if you found that, upon completing their trip to Venus, they had *no* conception of space, location, or degree of life. You may find, however, that the class truly enjoys writing dialogues, so your assignments for that unit would correlate with the students' success in that field.

It would truly be unfortunate if students develop an enthusiastic approach to writing, just to see it disappear because the topics presented were not carefully and thoughtfully provided.

What we offer in lieu of an extensive list are writing concepts that provide teachers with an inexhaustible supply of ideas. One concept is personification. Giving human qualities to non-humans. For example, by displaying different kinds of footwear, sandals, ballet shoes, cleats, boots, etc., children can write about what it feels like to be a piece of clothing. Perhaps the ballet shoes in a closet and its feelings about being worn by a 300-pound ballerina, or Julius Caesar's sandals' thoughts upon entering a big battle.

Personification can, of course, be extended to nature: an old oak tree being infested with gypsy moths, or animals—a turkey's story the day before Thanksgiving. Kids really enjoy writing in this style and the creativity and enthusiasm generated are unbelievable.

A variation to this concept would be role-reversal, where students take the opposite view of a situation. For example, instead of hitting the game-winning homer, write about the pitcher who gave up the home run. This technique is particularly helpful in writing in the content areas. For example, instead of writing a dull report on Eli Whitney, write a story about Whitney's mother and how she views his tinkering in the barn. These topics can be taken from the texts or even the newspapers. Writing a story about the astronaut who couldn't go on the space shuttle, the mayor who lost the election, the school system that had too much money. Personification and role-reversal alone would provide as many topics as you would need for an entire year.

Another concept which provides unlimited topics is feelings. Students relate well for they experience a cavalcade of feelings and moods throughout every class day. Topics would vary from anger and loneliness to joy and elation. These topics lead themselves well to poetry and offer children an ideal vehicle for illustration.

Story starters and unfinished sentences provide the children with a starting point from which creativity and imagination flourish. For example: "the funniest thing that ever happened to me..." You could vary this approach by using famous pictures and paintings and with each picture give a beginning caption. For example, with the Mona Lisa, "I hate smiling, but . . ." or with Gilbert Stuart's George Washington, "I wish I could be..." or Whistler's Mother, "What can I do now that the T.V. is broken. . . ."

If you happen to teach in a subject other than English, another good technique is letter writing. For example,

Nathan Hale's last letter to his mother before his execution, Thomas Hooker's letters back to Newtown upon arriving in Connecticut. This technique offers an enjoyable way for students to demonstrate their capabilities in the subject area plus it also provides a vibrant alternative to the often dull, read the chapter and answer the questions.

By now you are probably thinking this is simple, why didn't I ever think of it? If this applies to you, we can only say that life is the source of all creativity. In our fast-paced mechanical world we often overlook the simplest of beauties. Think back to when you were a child and for hours you would watch ants building a home or the sadness felt when a pet dies. The wonderment was there, the motivation was there, yet somewhere along the way life and all that it encompasses seems to have drifted out of our thoughts. It is true that children are more sophisticated now than we were, the toy wagon is now replaced by a ten-speed bike, the bat and ball are now replaced by electronic games, but the wonder and excitement are still there waiting to be tapped and it is as easy as opening our eyes.

Evaluation

Okay, the student has finally put something down on paper and handed it in. Please keep in mind that the previous activities were merely stimulators to create the writing enthusiasm. Evaluative techniques should be applied to the student's writing at such a time when the teacher feels that the student is ready for such criticism. Hopefully, by the end of the nine or 10 activities listed, the teacher and student have developed the bond of trust and classroom atmosphere that allows for successful and constructive evaluation.

We have noticed that the singular, most difficult area for teachers in any writing program concerns itself with the evaluation. It is at this point that a creative writing program sinks or swims. In an informal survey taken by us of sixth and seventh grade teachers, the consensus was that the teachers felt that they were not sufficiently qualified to evaluate a student's composition. We feel, however, that all teachers are sufficiently qualified and all that is needed is a simple process by which to evaluate.

There are three significant factors which have played an integral part in the failure of past writing programs to achieve the optimum results.

Heading the list is the teacher's ever increasing dependence on teacher's guides. It becomes apparent that, after a few years of teaching, teachers' idealistic goals are shelved in favor of simple scoring, simple averaging, and simple grading. In this process, we are inadvertently creating educated robots, not educated thinkers. Several of the teachers that we questioned felt that, if there was a simple checklist which could be consulted, it would make their job easier and more palatable. Such a list will not be offered in this paper, but we will offer evaluation procedures that will foster creativity rather than stifle it.

The second area of concern for teachers in the evaluation process concerns itself with the correction of mechanical mistakes. It is infinitely easier to profess not to be an English teacher and thereby absolve oneself of the responsibility for correcting mechanical mistakes than it is to evaluate using common sense. Conversely, many programs suffer because the evaluation process overstresses the mechanical errors to such a degree that at times correcting these papers is so time-consuming that after a few assignments the teacher begins to fall behind and either doesn't correct the papers at all and drops the program, or is forever trying to catch up on the work, which deprives the students of immediate reinforcement and consistency. The following pages will provide alternative methods of evaluation that will hopefully alleviate teachers' apprehensions concerning the mechanics of writing.

The third area of concern in past writing programs centers on the length of time it takes to correct the volume of papers received. It often seems impossible to correct the tests alone in various content areas; now we have lots of notebooks with lots of papers to correct as well. From our own experiences, we have found it to be a nerve shattering experience to be faced with carrying home milk crates containing 90-125 notebooks. Yet, through a little careful planning ahead of time, the stack of notebooks seems less imposing. We will offer aids to planning that should enable the teacher to more fully enjoy the weekend outside rather than inside with a red pen.

One basic assumption is that writing assignments should not be spur-of-the-moment, but rather they should be well thought-out sequential assignments. It is only natural to assume that there is some underlying objective for giving a particular writing assignment. The teacher should make up some long and short range objectives that he or she wishes the students to experience.

Richard L. Larson, in "Teaching Before We Judge," emphasizes that before giving an assignment the teacher should plan it out carefully, identify the student operations to complete the assignment, and most importantly, should recognize each assignment as part of a sequential course in English Composition.

Now this will probably rub some teachers the wrong way. We can hear the arguments now. "Grading compositions is unfair to the student because it will inhibit their creativity," or "How can you put a grade on creativity," and the list goes on and on. It is logic such as this that points out why students in high school have trouble writing a simple composition. We hope to offer in this segment various strategies and organizations that will make the teacher's job more responsible and the students' written efforts more meaningful.

It is imperative that the students' compositions remain organized in order to evaluate sequential development. We all know what happens to the students' individual papers when they are handed back. Their prime function often tends to be material for paper airplanes, miniature basketballs, or street litter. If all the writings were contained in a simple wirebound notebook (containing no other subjects other than writing), or in a loose-leaf notebook to be kept at school, it would provide student, teacher and parent with an up-to-the-minute analysis of progress throughout the year.

For some of us it is an easier task to organize the students rather than organize ourselves. We suggest that when planning for the year that a *specific* time be given for creative writing. Since, as stated previously, this section of the unit deals primarily with later assignments throughout the year, ample time should be given the students to write and even more importantly, given to the teacher to correct. We suggest beginning warm-up exercises and the topic on Monday and requiring the finished paper on Wednesday. Friday, the notebooks should be passed back to the students so that they have ample time to digest comments, confer with the teacher and possibly rewrite so that on Monday of the next week they are ready to begin again.

Consistency is the key. Once you begin to digress from *your* organizational set-up, you can also expect the students to do the same.

Now on to the evaluation!!!

Cooper and O'Dell in *Evaluating Writing* stress that it is critical for teachers to know why they are evaluating before they choose the proper evaluation technique. The authors place evaluations into three major categories:.

1. Administrative—Evaluation for the purpose of placements and grades.
2. Instructional—Diagnosis of problems and feedback.
3. Evaluation and Research—The measurement of students’ individual growth and relation to his peers’ growth. ⁵

Cooper emphasizes various types of holistic evaluations: holistic evaluation doesn’t specifically list particular problems in the composition; rather it takes an overview of particular areas. It eliminates the burden of the teacher painstakingly making each individual correction and comment. The vehicle used to promote a holistic evaluation may be a analytic scale. The scale (Diederich, 1974) may be organized as follows:

<i>Low</i>	<i>Middle</i>	<i>High</i>
<i>General Merit</i>		
Ideas	1,2 3,4	5
Organization	1,2 3,4	5
Wording	1,2 3,4	5
Flavor	1,2 3,4 5	__
<i>Mechanics</i>		
Usage	1,2 3,4	5
Punctuation	1,2 3,4	5
Spelling	1,2 3,4	5
Handwriting	1,2 3,4 5	__
	Total	__ ⁶

The advantage to such a scale is that the teacher can weigh the scale to the particular objective which he feels should be measured at a particular point. For example, you may wish to give double point value to spelling and organization; therefore, the student’s mastery of these objectives would be reflected more accurately in the total grade. If used consistently, this scale affords the teacher and students a quick evaluative response which both comprehend fully. This is important for often times students do not understand why a particular grade is given. In other words, it reduces the chance of subjectivity in grading and increases the probability of objectivity. We feel the best way to utilize this scale is to prepare the scales on dittos—to be attached to a student’s paper upon passing it back. It is simply not enough to give a grade. After all, as previously stated, evaluation should not just be used in the administrative mode, but it should also be a factor in the instructional mode.

A second method of evaluation used in our classes this year is a non-graded evaluation predicated by the student’s performance over his last composition. Upon correcting a student’s composition, we have found it necessary to read it twice and to grade it twice. The first time we read it, we gave it a mark for content, either a minus (-), check (Å), or plus (+). The scores indicate a student’s overall progress in content from the previous writing assignment. We have found that by this method we are more able to tune in to *what* the student is saying without having our evaluation muddled by countless corrections. The second read-through is primarily to locate mechanical errors (grammar, punctuation, spelling, etc.). The grade is then also reflected by a check, plus, or minus based on the progress from the previous week.

Let’s face it. We all have students who have plenty to say yet through no fault of their own lack the tools to

say it properly. In essence we show the student his paper has merit, yet we also point out the areas of writing that need the improvement.

Both of these evaluative procedures allow a parent, during the course of one short meeting a semester or opportunity to view the child's progress from starting point to present and more importantly it allows the student to view his own progress.

One important note: we have found without exception that should a student receive a ++ on a paper, the next effort will always be of low quality. Please be aware of this phenomenon for if not diagnosed and recognized, it could seriously affect all future writings. The cause for this may be that the student gets lazy once he gets praised.

These first two evaluative processes are teacher-directed. The third and fourth processes we will discuss are student-directed. Thomas Cain in *Common Sense About Writing* advocates a student's errors list. ⁷ The technique is basically self-correcting and it gives the student a sense of motivation in his striving for writing excellence. The systematic approach is as follows:

In their notebooks, the students should title three separate pages:

1. Major Errors
 - a. sentence structure
 - b. poor organization
 - c. failure to stick to a point
 - d. overwriting
2. Minor Errors
 - a. agreement of subject and verb
 - b. quotations
 - c. commas
3. Spelling

The students would list what they believe their faults are within this framework. They are to make their entries as brief as possible.

When the student receives his corrected paper he is to record the comments under the appropriate list. For example, if thirty words are circled in red because of inappropriate spelling, on the errors list the student will

record the title of the paper, date, and the correct spellings for each circled word. It is imperative that the list be cumulative to include all papers or the self-evaluation aspect would be lost. For the next exercise the student should refer to the list and thus improve his spelling during each successive paper. Perhaps this would foster more use of a dictionary when unsure of a spelling before handing the paper in. In effect, this evaluative process really takes the burden of responsibility off of the teachers and places it in the hands of the student.

We believe that this process, although best suited for the motivated writer, can also be used with the beginning writer on a simple scale, substituting, such as using capital letters, appropriate punctuation, etc., in the errors list. Perhaps it would be advantageous to consult the performance objectives for the level of language arts skills on which the student is functioning. We feel that if your student is functioning on a third grade level even though he is in a sixth grade class, it is of more importance to his development to scale this evaluative procedure to that level. After all, to insist that this type of student must be aware of adverbial clauses and correct inflection just because it is on the sixth grade list would be ludicrous.

The second type of student-directed evaluation concerns itself with the revision of one's work. Although it seems a simple enough process, it often is more difficult to achieve than the first attempt.

Students, right from the beginning, should be encouraged to write first drafts of anything they are going to hand in. Students should be given a few tips on how to rewrite constructively and accurately.

Point out that to eliminate messy cross-outs and unreadable words ample space should be left in the margins for their corrections. The student should not attempt to revise the paper for at least 24 hours because if they try it right after they write the first draft, very little will appear to need revision. While reading the paper for revision, students should be encouraged to have specific objectives for reading. The first time through, the student should attempt to simplify the paper by cutting out all clutter and unnecessary words. The second time through, the students should be reading to analyze content and should do this aloud. The third time through, the student should focus on mechanical mistakes.

Now this may seem to be a rather involved process, but given teacher-directed practice in the classroom, most students are able to develop their own revision style. Once again, the responsibility for the written piece is the student's, and the burden for the teacher is substantially lessened. We have found it helpful to list revision steps on a ditto and then to have the student tape it onto the cover of his notebook. It therefore is readily accessible and offers the student an added level of support. The following is a sample revision list which we have developed:

1. Did I write a first draft?
2. Did I leave space for revision?
3. Did I wait one day to reread my first draft?
4. Did I reread for content and clarity?
5. Did I eliminate clutter?
6. Did I stick to the topic?
7. Do I have a good beginning, middle, and end?
8. Did I end too abruptly?
9. Did I reread a second time for mechanics?
10. Did I capitalize where needed?
11. Did I punctuate correctly?

12. Did I eliminate run-on or incomplete sentences?
13. Did I use good paragraph form?
14. Do I have a good title?
15. Am I pleased with what I have written. (If not, how can I make this paper better?)

Although this list has been written in the first person, it may be adapted for peer revision and evaluation. If an atmosphere of trust has been developed within the class, the children will enjoy and benefit from reading and evaluating the work of their classmates. They will see many of their own errors and will eliminate the need for teachers to be the sole evaluator, for, in effect, they will be their own teachers.

We realize that there are as many different evaluative procedures as there are teachers. Everyone has their own style of correcting papers and we all feel our way is the best way. Our purpose in this section is not to try and change your style and technique, rather it is meant as an aid to be used either by itself or in conjunction with what you are already using. We cannot overemphasize the importance of the evaluative tool for a student to progress and the consistency in which it should be used. What is of utmost importance is that the teacher be fully aware of what it is we are evaluating and why. If the answers to these two questions are not specific or valid, it is imperative for each one of us to carefully diagnose our methods and perhaps be open-minded enough to change these methods. If not, our roles as facilitators of learning are nothing more than comic titles.

There is no doubt that children learn by doing. So, too, teachers learn by trying. It is our fervent hope that the ideas presented in this unit will help to break down the barriers for both children and teachers.

We must be aware of our limitations as teachers, but must not be hesitant to experiment with new ideas. If success is not immediate, do not despair for the barriers to writing are so extensive in their construction that a spark of enthusiasm may very well light the fire of success. After all, what the children need is not to have a fire lit under them; rather, the fire should be lit within them.

The self-confidence, organization and trust that you bring to a child through this unit will benefit the child throughout his life and, as teachers, is there no greater reward?

Our wish is that *all* children see flowers of all colors and that through their imagination and their enthusiasm, this world will be a source of constant joy and wonderment.

Sample Lesson Plan 1 Brainstorming

Materials Notebook paper, Construction Paper, Crayons, Magic Markers, other available art supplies

Procedure Write the word Love on the blackboard. Explain to the students that they will have five minutes to compile a free association list of words or ideas that Love brings to mind. After the five minutes have elapsed, a brief discussion of their associations might foster some self analysis into the child's thought patterns.

The results of brainstorming can be used in many ways. For example, in this lesson, ask the children to develop greeting cards using whatever seems appropriate from the list they have compiled. The greeting card may be a thank you note, birthday, friendship, or sympathy card.

This technique may be used throughout the year as special days and occasions arise. Children will experience pleasure and satisfaction in developing not only the written portion of the card, but also in designing and illustrating their work. These cards will definitely bring pleasure to those who receive them.

Sample Lesson Plan 2—"I don't know how to get started!"

Materials Pen and Paper

A question asked of every teacher at one time or another is how can I begin this story. Examples of stories written by authors may give some ideas, but the teacher should present specific techniques. In this lesson, four techniques are offered. They should be copied into creative writing notebooks for future reference. Hopefully, all of the techniques will help the child to get the attention of the reader and build individual confidence in getting started.

Procedure Select a topic such as "Friday the Thirteenth." Brainstorm. Ask the children to write an essay on the subject. Offer techniques to begin:

1. The Rhetorical Question "What would you do if you were about to board an airplane and remembered it was Friday the Thirteenth?"

With this simple opening you have involved your reader and can now begin your story.

2. Suspense As I tried to climb up from the hole in which I had fallen, I realized the pain in my arms made it impossible.

The audience will want to know more.

3. Famous Quotation "Two wrongs don't make a right," said the teacher. . . .

4. News Item or Headline Child Genius (*student's name*) Missing!

Hopefully, these techniques can be transferred and adapted for other stories and essays written throughout the year. The child in this lesson will use one of these techniques for their “Friday the Thirteenth” story.

Sample Lesson Plan 3 How to Succeed in Business Without Really Trying!

Materials Miscellaneous items

This lesson is primarily intended to be developed during the holiday season. As we all are well aware of the inundation of the airwaves by companies promoting dubious practical gifts, this is an opportunity for children to develop their own product and successfully advertise it.

Procedure: Initiate a discussion amongst the students about the products commercialized on television during this time of year. For example, the inside to egg scrambler which purports to improve the quality of scrambled eggs, the salad spinner which makes salads fresher by spinning water off of the vegetables, the record vacuum, etc. (The kids will offer a million different products!) The kids really enjoy talking and joking about these products and you will find their participation overwhelming.

Next, lead the discussion towards the reasons why these products are only advertised at this certain time of the year and discuss the merits and price of such products. While the creative juices are flowing, having the children write all the different uses for a common pencil. Give them approximately five minutes. Some responses might be: a pool cue for an ant, stakes for tomato plants, imaginary weapons, etc. All of the class will want to offer their ideas and opinions. Praise them on their ingenuity and, hopefully, show them that they, too, using simple materials can develop a product that serves some useful purpose.

The assignment will consist of the students developing a gadget, machine or product that performs a certain useful task, all the while stressing that the gadget must work. The second part of the assignment will be to write exactly a sixty-second commercial to exhort the virtues of their “invention.” The students will be given one week to develop their ideas to fruition. After one week has elapsed, they will then “sell” their product in front of the class. Another variation of this technique is to have the children using an item for a purpose other than its intended purpose. For example, a hammer as a meat tenderizer, baseball bat as a moth killer.

This lesson has been used very successfully with all levels of students and they really get a kick out of it.

Notes

1. Ken Macrorie. *Telling Writing* (New Jersey, Hayden Book Co., 1976), p.21
2. Mina Shaughnessy, *Errors and Expectations* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1977) p. 286.
3. William Zinsser, *On Writing Well* (New York: Harper & Row, 1980), p. 112.
4. Macrorie, p. 5.
5. Charles R. Cooper and Lee Odell, *Evaluating Writing* (New York: N.C.T.E., 1977) p. ix.
6. Ibid., p. 7.
7. Thomas Cain, *Common Sense About Writing* (New Jersey, Prentice Hall, 1967) pp. 8-12.

Annotated Bibliography

Berbrich, Joan D. *Writing Creatively* . New York: AMSCO School Publications, 1977

A creative writing course for children which offers many fun activities for learning to write poetry, essays, plays, and short stories. Brainstorming techniques and warm-up mind stretchers are also offered.

Cain, Thomas. *Common Sense About Writing* . New Jersey: Prentice-Hall, Inc., 1967.

As the title indicates, Cain's book offers very practical suggestions and lists for such things as planning papers, points to remember in writing, essentials for good paragraphs, how to develop an errors list and how to revise what has been written. A very helpful guide for any writing program.

Cooper, Charles R. and Odell, Lee. *Evaluating Writing: Describing , Measuring, Judging* . New York: National Conference of Teachers of English, 1977.

Develops the idea of evaluating writing in a meaningful manner through such techniques as the holistic evaluation process, individualized goal setting, self-evaluation and peer evaluation. A vital book in the development of evaluating the writing program.

Emig, Janet. *The Composing Processes of Twelfth Graders* . Urbana Illinois: National Conference of Teachers of English, 1971.

Case studies of various students and the writing process. Very important in developing the oral conference technique and the steps involved in improving what has been written.

Gibson, Walker. *Seeing and Writing* . New York: Longman, 1959.

Although the book is basically fifteen exercises in writing for college students, it can be adapted for younger children. The strength of this work is the emphasis on the senses and sensory deprivation. Especially interesting is how things are seen and interpreted according to time and place.

Hirsch, E.D. *The Philosophy of Composition* . Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1977.

Hirsch stresses the importance of separating the teaching of writing from the teaching of literature. Several important rules for writing such as clarity, the paragraph, and keeping related words together are stressed. The unique skills involved in learning to write are discussed.

Koch, Kenneth. *Wishes, Lies, and Dreams* . New York: Chelsea House, 1970.

An excellent source of ideas for poetry stressing both relevancy for students and the belief that all writing has merit. A must for anyone in developing a creative writing program.

Macrorie, Ken. *Telling Writing* . New Jersey: Hayden Book Co., Inc., 1976.

A sequential list of writing activities which takes the child from non-focused free writing experiences to well-developed essays. Very well organized and helpful in planning the writing program. Stresses honesty as the definition of good writing.

Moffett, James. *Teaching the Universe of Discourse* . New York: Houghton Mifflin Co., 1968.

In Chapter Six, "Learning to Write by Writing," Moffett stresses the role of the teacher in facilitating the writing program. It is here the ideas of quality feedback are discussed. Peer evaluation is also discussed at length and the role of the teacher is defined as teaching the students to teach each other.

Shaughnessy, Mina P. *Errors and Expectations* . New York: Oxford University Press, 1977.

A guide for the teacher of basic writing. Shaughnessy deals with the development of an errors list and scale for evaluating writing. Chapter Eight on expectations is especially helpful.

Zinsser, William. *On Writing Well* . New York: Harper & Row Publishers, 1980.

An informal guide to writing non-fiction. Zinsser does a wonderful job discussing the elimination of clutter in writing and the importance of simplicity. The stress is on style, the audience, and the important concept that writing is not a contest. Very readable.

The books listed in this Bibliography can all be found at the Yale Library and many are also available at the New Haven Free Public Library and at Southern Connecticut State College. In addition, many are available in paperback.

<https://teachersinstitute.yale.edu>

©2019 by the Yale-New Haven Teachers Institute, Yale University

For terms of use visit <https://teachersinstitute.yale.edu/terms>