



Curriculum Units by Fellows of the Yale-New Haven Teachers Institute  
1986 Volume IV: The Process of Writing

---

## Approaches to Writing

Curriculum Unit 86.04.01  
by Carol L. Altieri

This curriculum unit will be used as an elective five-month semester course or as a complete ten-month required course for honors, college, and basic English three and four students. It could also be adapted to coordinate with the English three, American, and English four English Literature courses. Students who elect to take the course (or if it is required) should know how to write a unified and coherent paragraph with few errors in mechanics, Punctuation, sentence structure, or usage. However, this course will emphasize the generative stage of creating ideas which the students will then be able to shape through critical and editing techniques.

Over the past decade new developments have been taking place in the teaching of writing, developments which do not constitute a revolution but are significant changes, nevertheless. Such teachers, researchers and writers as Peter Elbow, Janet Emig, Gabriele Lusser Rico, Ken Macrorie, Donald Murray, Marie Smith, and Gene Stanford (to name only a few) have developed new techniques and strategies, as well as new perspectives as to how best to improve students' writing abilities.

One of these perspectives is that writing is best taught as a process or series of stages including prewriting, composing, proofreading and revision. As William Zinsser states in *On Writing Well*, "the new trend in writing emphasizes the process of rewriting, revising, reshaping and rewriting a piece of writing until it becomes a better product." <sup>1</sup> But all of these editing activities presume that the student has successfully made it through the creative stage.

For some students (especially in the basic classes) writing is a very inhibiting and painful activity. The mere mention of a writing assignment strikes panic in their minds and they vehemently complain about doing it. Furthermore, not only inexperienced but also experienced writers share the fear of a blank sheet of paper, according to Donald Murray. <sup>2</sup> Other students may write technically well, but the quality is boring and lifeless.

It seems a challenging undertaking to penetrate the barriers that have been set up; yet the quality of students' writing should and must be improved. If sequential, stimulating and frequent writing assignments are well-planned, English teachers can make a difference in the power, depth and quality of their students' writing. Therefore, this curriculum unit will first focus on five successful techniques which aim to help students to overcome writing obstacles and to achieve power and depth of expression in narrative and expository writing. These five techniques are as follows: making a list, freewriting, brainstorming, clustering and modeling. These techniques will be introduced during the first two weeks of the course. Then students will be encouraged to use either one technique or several throughout the program.

Writing a variety of assignments will be a natural, daily, continuous and sequential activity in a workshop classroom. Students will be directly involved in their own learning by writing every day for classwork and for homework almost every night—for the greatest progress to be made. They will read their best writings during the workshop and listen to others' writing to evaluate and comment on. At times they will be required to exchange their first drafts for close checking by another student before second drafts are written. The workshops will be a whole-class experience for at least three of the five days a week. On other days, small group activities and individual conferences with the teacher will occur. Students will learn from themselves, each other, professional writers, and teachers by listening to, responding to and reading a variety of writings in contemporary fiction and poetry, as well as the writings of their peers. They will try to perceive others' writing carefully, imitate the models, and cooperate as a community of writers working on challenging writing assignments.

**Objectives:**

1. To teach techniques which emphasize the writing process and help overcome writing barriers.
2. To expand students' ability to write by providing work on various stages of the writing process and on a variety of styles.
3. To help students achieve fluency, vividness, depth, and preciseness of expression.
4. To stimulate students to create original prose pieces and poems which express their own life experience and are engaging to read.
5. To have students become familiar with a variety of writings in contemporary fiction and poetry.
6. To help students discover their own reality and their own distinct voice, through poetry and prose.
7. To help students prepare a portfolio of their best work—revised, rewritten, arranged, titled, and polished.

In order for students to generate ideas, to warm up, and to express their thoughts, each writing activity may begin with a class discussion. The students will be guided by the teacher, who will ask pertinent questions about the topic. The questions should stimulate thought, feeling, and imagination. Students will be strongly encouraged to discuss and express the ideas they will eventually write about in a class workshop and have their ideas challenged by their classmates and teacher. This will help to provoke and sharpen their thinking.

Another approach would require students to work in pairs or in groups of four. One student in each pair or group will be the recorder, and the other or others will begin as the questioners. The writer will discuss each thought or idea before writing. The other member or members will ask questions to stimulate the writer to seek specific details and to achieve clarity. Trying out new ideas, hearing other points of view, talking with others, and expressing tentative ideas are all very useful activities during the germination stage, which may be short or long depending on the assignment. At this stage the following directions could be given to the

students to get a writing launched:

Divide into small groups of three to five students each. Work together to write a paragraph following these steps:

1. Choose a subject that everyone knows something about.
2. Write a topic sentence about the subject, making sure it is narrow enough to be covered in one paragraph.
3. Together make a list of details that support, explain, show, or illuminate the topic sentence.
4. Decide on the best order for the details.
5. Make sure all the details are relevant to the topic sentence.
6. Write the sentences containing details.
7. One member of the group can check the paragraph for completeness, adding more specific details if needed.
8. Have another member check the paragraph for coherence, adding transitions and filling in gaps.
9. Have another member of the group check the paragraph for spelling, punctuation, usage, and final form using "Composition Checklists," a folder for evaluating writing published by Stratton-Christian press.

This assignment may be done by making a list, which is an excellent technique for starting the mind working, for stimulating thought, and for gathering raw material.

The list will provide a base for further planning and thinking about the details and topic. Peter Elbow also suggests making a list of all the particulars that pertain to the topic, such as thoughts, incidents, sense impressions, examples, details and images. His directions have proved successful for many students. Give directions such as this: At this stage of the writing process write down whatever comes to your mind. Evaluating and arranging the details will come later in a tentative outline. Try not to digress, but stick to the main route. Sometimes one detail will suggest a related thought while you are following the first detail. Jot it down on the list without spending too much time on it. Then continue with your previous train of thought. Don't waste time or energy by stopping to cross out mistakes (Elbow, p. 27). The following is a list of details and images for an assignment on writing a place description entitled "Sojourn in the City of London":

1. the "real and unreal city" of London

2. Minolta camera loaded
3. red-brick, fairy-tale like Victorian building of Dillon's Book Store
4. Number 46 Gordon Square, Bloomsbury
5. Doughty Street house where Charles Dickens once lived
6. wild London traffic and boxy-black taxicabs
7. Bombay Brasserie smells of spices and cardamon
8. SoHo—London's oldest foreign community
9. Mozart lived here for eight years
10. Punks parading in the park
11. Hari Krishnas in white robes playing drums
12. Mock-tudor cottage of medieval construction
13. Bright Christmas-looking lights
14. Dim Sum buns and sweet and sour pork
15. "Temporary House for Women Who Have Necessary Recommendations"
16. Georges Inn where Charles Dickens ate and drank
17. St. Magnus the Martyr Church.
18. Queen Victoria Memorial in red and grey stone
19. a dreadful slum alley where child robbers worked in the 1840's
20. Warm, old wood, paneled pub

## First Lesson Plan

---

Assignment: Using the listing technique to generate ideas, write a description from memory that expresses the feeling of a particular place. What does it feel like to visit a new city? or to visit someone in the country?

What did it feel like to visit your grandmother? What did it feel like when you spent a day at the beach? What was it like when you went on vacation? This is a description of a place that should give a dominant impression or evoke a single mood from your own memory. Let the mood give your story its unity. Capture the mood for your reader by the use of images of sight, sound, smell, taste, and feelings. Following is the homework that will help to inspire the assignment.

Reading: *In the Stories of John Cheever* , “O City of Broken Dreams,” p. 42. Notice the imagery and mood Cheever evokes.  
In *Cathedral* by Raymond Carver, “Chef’s House,” p. 27.  
In *Story and Structure* , “Clay” by James Joyce, p. 448.

Notice the imagery of sound and sense, the association between place, character and mood.

Making a list of details, images and sense impressions helps the writer to use vivid specifics, instead of inexplicit generalities, according to Donald Murray. He suggests that the teacher may demonstrate to students the way to make a list of vivid specifics related to a writing assignment (Murray, p. 43). The teacher will request the class to participate in selecting the specifics for the description. Then the students can choose the details which will make an effective description. Therefore, the students learn to gather material for a prose piece, poem, or vignette which will be deep, not superficial. Effective writing shows, rather than tells, a great deal about a narrow subject. I will read an example of a paper I wrote on “Sojourn in the City of London” and show slides of England to provide inspiration for students to do their own description of a place.

Freewriting, the second useful technique, is simply an exercise in daydreaming or freethinking while writing without stopping.<sup>3</sup> The first goal a writer strives for is to find something to write about. The practice of freewriting helps generate ideas and helps the writer to see them. In addition, it helps to get the chaotic flux of thoughts out of the writer’s head and onto paper. Also, freewriting helps the writer to observe his experiences more perceptively and improve his verbal ability (Schor pp. 7-9). Finally, Peter Elbow states that freewriting helps release feelings of depression, unhappiness and tension, thus conditioning a student better for the writing process. <sup>4</sup> The following directions proved to be the most promising for students.

Explain to the class: Write for fifteen minutes about anything you’re interested in. Do not pause to look back, to cross out or erase something, to think about how to spell a word, or to think about what to say next. If you can’t think of a word or spelling first, omit it and keep writing. Spill out whatever is on your mind. If your mind goes blank, write: “I am looking for something to say” or “nothing comes to my mind” until you can think of something. Don’t feel inhibited. Look around you and write down what you observe. Let your mind wander off the topic if that is where it wants to go, but continue to write non-stop. Do not stop writing until you hear the

timer ring. Keep your freewriting exercises. Later read them to see if they can be revised into a better work (Macrorie, pp. 8-13).

Further explain to the class: Next do at least three of these freewritings for fifteen minutes for each day—during the morning, during the afternoon, or in the evening. Don't feel inhibited. Don't worry about punctuation, grammar, or the right word. Try, however, to write quickly, honestly, and freely. Then try focused freewriting. Remain with one of the following subjects for twenty minutes: men, women, high school, television programs, art exhibits or material possessions. Let the writing take its own course or let it follow your mind wherever it goes. Continue to write freely and honestly. Finally, write freely for a half an hour about something you were surprised or disappointed about. Write down everything you can remember about the experience (Macrorie, pp. 9-15). Similarly, Peter Elbow in *Writing With power* recommends: Separate the creating and the criticizing process so they don't interfere with each other. First write freely and uncritically in order to generate as many words and ideas as possible; then turn around and adopt a critical frame of mind and thoroughly revise what you have written (Elbow, p. 7). To repeat, freewriting separates the intuitive creative process from the criticizing process and helps the writer think about his subject. It is a fruitful way of helping students use their powers of imagination, observation, language, and creativity (Elbow, pp. 13-15).

The third useful technique for producing ideas and details and for achieving fluency is brainstorming. With this approach students launch a writing assignment by being asked or by asking themselves probing questions about their topics. Such questions include the following:

1. Who is the story about? Who else is involved? What can you tell about the person or people?
2. What is happening? List your ideas about the happening.
3. When did this take place? Does the time matter? Could it happen today?
4. Where did it take place? Does the place matter? Could it happen here?
5. Why did it happen? Do you know why it happened? If not, can you guess? [All of the above questions were adapted from one source.]<sup>5</sup>
6. What attitude should you take toward your subject?
7. What are some specific details you can use to support your topic?
8. What would be the best order for your ideas?

Sometimes a rough outline can follow brainstorming, freewriting, or jotting down a list. Also, a student can use several techniques together when writing a paper.

The student should use the technique that works best for him. All of the five techniques will be introduced in the first three weeks of the course. I will spend several class periods on each technique—depending upon how appropriate it seems for a particular assignment. Then the most effective techniques such as

brainstorming, clustering and modeling will be used throughout the program.

Some writers write more effectively if careful specific guidelines are spelled out for them. For this purpose, Walter Lamberg suggests a writing assignment that uses the brainstorming technique to accumulate material for a topic:

Write a narrative about an interesting incident that happened in less than one day. Include all the details that answer these questions: What was it about? What happened? Whom did it happen to? Who else was involved? Why did it happen? When did it happen? Where did it happen? Try to write as much as you can, at least one page.

6

With the brainstorming approach the teacher's role is to encourage the students to dig deeply for relevant information, either from their own life experiences or from their reading. During this phase of the process, the teacher should arrange conferences with each student to provide guidelines for him to follow. Eventually, the teacher should aim for the students to become increasingly independent. Thus the students could engage in the process by themselves. Some additional, surefire, practical applications of the brainstorming technique are suggested by the following:

1. Write a missing person's description of the student sitting behind you.

What is his/her height?

What is his/her weight?

What color hair does he/she have?

What color eyes does he/she have?

Does he/she wear glasses? What kind?

What kind of clothing does this person have on?

What colors are his/her clothing?

Does he/she have any special features or identifying marks?

2. A newspaper reporter wants to interview you as a typical student having a typical schoolday.

The interviewer wants to know everything you did on this day, and everyone you saw or spoke to since you came to school this morning. Write a list of every detail you have seen or done on this day.

3. You have just seen an automobile accident. Both cars are badly damaged. The people involved are injured. Write an accident report for the police station or insurance company. Include the following:

What time of day did the accident occur?

What were the road conditions?

Did the two drivers follow the traffic signs and lights?

What direction was each car traveling?

How did the accident happen?

In what order did each thing happen to them? 7

Clustering, the fourth technique to launch writing and to tap the “secret reserves of imaginative power” has aroused much enthusiasm among writing teachers. It is similar to brainstorming in that it uses free-association. In *Writing the Natural Way* by Gabriele Lusser Rico, the technique is precisely and clearly explained with many valuable examples. Clustering makes use of the imaginative mind at first and the critical, logical mind later in the process. It helps to reduce anxiety and encourages the free expression and sense of wonder of childhood (Rico, pp. 29-46). A nucleus or kernel word or short phrase provides a stimulus for releasing word and phrase associations from the creative mind in a short period of time. The stimulus kernel word “connects, associates, suggests and evokes” other impressions, ideas, words, phrases and images, which result in the original voice of each individual doing the clustering (Rico, p. 33). For this clustering assignment students should read the following:

## Second Lesson plan

---

In *Cathedral* by Raymond Carver, “A Small Good Thing,” p. 59.

In *Story and Structure* by Laurence Perrine, “A Mother’s Tale,” p. 318.

In American *Primitive* by Mary Oliver, “Web,” p. 41.

Assignment: Try to unlock your feelings, the unconscious and the irrational as a source for a poem or prose. Describe what you fear. Try to express this fear to the reader. Use the technique of clustering to begin your writing. Gabriele Lusser Rico recommends the following directions:

1. Start with a word stimulus such as “fear” in an oval in the middle of a page of paper. Write down in its own oval any images, connections, impressions or phrases the word “fear” associates with in your mind. Connect the word, phrase or image to its preceding oval. When you receive a new idea, start at the main nucleus word and radiate outward until you can’t generate any more new ideas (Rico p. 36).
2. Let your imaginative mind make associations and connections. Don’t analyze any of the associations during this phase. Connect with lines the words and ideas that seem related. Draw arrows to show direction. Don’t worry about the chaos. Just remember that it is the first step in the “creative process” (Rico, p. 37).
3. Continue writing the impressions, images, ideas and associations stimulated by the word “fear” for ten minutes while being totally involved with the process until you have a focus for what you want to write about.  
Your mind might then say, “Aha! I think I know what I want to say” (Rico, p. 37).
4. Look over the impressions and associations in the cluster to see if one of them might start you writing your first sentence and give you a main focus (Rico, p. 37).
5. Use only what appears to be related to your “pattern of meaning” to describe what your fear. Try to communicate this fear to the reader. It is not necessary to use all the associations in your vignette, poem or story (Rico, p. 37).



6. Once you have written your prose or poetry bring your writing to a close “by looking at your beginning and hooking your ending into the beginning by repeating a word, phrase, a dominant thought, or an emotion that was also present in your opening line . . . ” (Rico, p. 38).

7. Read over the piece carefully and critically. Revise and improve the writing. After you have revised your writing, read it aloud to your peers in a workshop and ask them to criticize it honestly. What is effective? What could be improved? What is vivid, precise and memorable? Tough, honest readers and listeners help one to perfect one’s writing. The following is an example of my clustering on “fear” and the resulting poem: A prose vignette could also be written. See Illustration A.

#### Illustration A

*(figure available in print form)*

#### Apogee of Fear

35,000 feet above sea level  
flying in the grey storm  
Bludgeons of lightning strike  
the nose of the jet.  
Gripping the back of the seat  
sweat collects under me.  
Flash of lightning explodes . . .  
Oxygen masks drop from their cabinets  
Transparent faces of the stewardesses  
No word from the pilot  
Fire ignites me.  
Heavy stillness of the passengers.

## Third Lesson plan

---

East, West, North, or South Wind

Poetry Assignment: This is a metaphor (connections) exercise: Free-associate in connection with part of the world, east, west, north, or south. After free-association with the cluster process, select your best images and details and put them into order in a sequence poem of your "wind": East, West, North, or South. For homework, revise and perfect your "wind" poem to hand in and/or write its opposite. The following is an example of how I used the clustering process to write the poem "South Wind" after a trip to Cancun, Mexico: See Here is the resulting prose poem:

Illustration B

*(figure available in print form)*

South Wind

The hot sun sucking up the sap.  
Leeching the soil of its nutrients,  
returning exotic flowers.  
Limestone star-shaped fossil sand  
stays air-conditioned with the sun.  
Wind blowing the palm fronds  
like a Mayan dressed in jaguar  
skins thundering through the forest.  
The feathers of his headdress fluttering  
in the Gulf-stream wind.  
The wind spiralling itself into conch shells  
whistling like Mayan Flutes.  
palm fronds breathing their green coconuts  
as they knock against one another.  
Rich purple Wandering Jew  
air-layered to bleach-white sand.  
The wind playing with the rainbow-colored  
sailboats as the sailor struggles with the  
sails.  
Another rider parasurfs toward the blue sky  
under a multi-colored parachute.

## Fourth Lesson plan

---

Modeling, the fifth and last prewriting technique helps students' imagination, creativity, and writing skills to blossom. Also, it provides a concrete way of teaching and offers rewarding experiences for the students. It is a way of using another author's work for inspiration and guidelines to launch a similar style of writing. "Its purpose is to give you a structure, an aesthetic pattern to follow, within which to treat your own discovered content." (Rico, pp. 44-46). It does not have to be a professional writer's style, but could be a writing of anyone's whom you admire. Both clustering and modeling can be used together to create a richer, "more concise, more evocative, more polished, more rhythmic" piece of writing (Rico, pp. 44-46).

The following assignment makes use of the clustering and modeling techniques. The students could also use the other pre-writing techniques of making a list, freewriting, or brainstorming.

"And even if you were in some prison the walls of which let none of the sounds of the world come to your senses—would you not then still have your childhood, that treasure-house of memories? Turn your attention thither. Try to raise the submerged sensations of that ample past; your personality will grow more firm, your solitude will widen and will become a dusky dwelling past which the noise of others goes by far away." From *Letters to a Young poet* by Rainer Maria Rilke (pp. 19-20).

Write a story, poem, or vignette about childhood memories. Use specific imagery—feelings, sights, sounds, smells, touches and taste. Try to become totally immersed and bring the reader into your experience. Use a dominant impression for your kernel word and radiate other memories and associations out from that center. Write in a voice of a child or in the voice of memory of an adult (or both), but try to give attention to what a child would observe. Read in *Story and Structure*, "The Drunkard" by Frank O'Connor, p. 275, and "A Christmas Memory" by Truman Capote, p. 283, for inspiration. The following is an example of a prose poem I wrote for this assignment:

### Childhood Memories

Out of the mists of the past memories emerge like Spring crocuses. My toddler sister curled up in a pink-peaked cap in a bushel basket sitting in the middle of the hill in the warmth of the sun. In the New Hampshire woods entranced by the lispy voiced oven bird fluttering north in the early Spring. After sunset he lilts out his teacher song to attract a wife. Then together they build their brick-oven nest with a tiny doorway for mother to enter and sit on the speckled eggs to hatch. The remnants of the March winds float across my face as I strike out in search of a baby calf that the mother goes all cow's eyes over. Enthralled by the marsh marigolds that float like children's faces in the pond above the murmuring Spring peepers. Submerged in the deep slushy mud hiding out a little longer as the mother cow hides huddled together with her calf behind the lichen-coated beech trees. pussy willows clinging to the writhing mother branch surging upwards to the light. Back near the smokehouse, the apple tree blossoms embroider the shimmering fragrant orchard while Beverly turns cartwheels near them. Gathering the bloodstream of sap flowing through the maple trees, I will make maple syrup for frogs in the snow. I imagine I can float over retiled rooftops like Peter Pan, Wendy and the Lost Boys delighted with Spring in the woods. I watch a barn swallow skimming over and pirouetting among the clouds. I am dazzled by the Unicorn prancing in the woods searching for a lost mate.

I especially endorse the teaching of imaginative writing in this curriculum unit because it serves as a humanizing activity. By stimulating young people to create stories, poems, and prose pieces about their own experiences and their insights of outside experiences, they will probe deeply, into the nature of themselves

and other humans. Writing frequently will help students to express themselves more clearly, vividly, precisely and deeply, to respond to what they see as important and to cope better with their problems. They can express their personal feelings, thoughts, beliefs, ideas, opinions, convictions, joys, dreams, desires, ambitions, sorrows and disappointments in their writings and evoke a response from their readers. Moreover, the writing unit will help students to organize their thinking, to think logically and to support their ideas with evidence and concrete examples.

I believe that all students have some inherent creative ability in one way or another. No doubt, every person has the power to express his own distinct personality. Yet, much of the latent creative ability of a high school student must be aroused and developed. Therefore, it must be the teacher's responsibility to bring out the creativity that students possess but do not use because of lack of stimulation, inhibitions or negative attitudes. In "Taking Risks: The Writer as Effective Teacher" by Nina Darnton, she expresses best what I aim to do in this curriculum guide:

. . . I hope to show them how literature is made—to understand it better, love it more, help them think about it and about other things too, because you write about things, not just words, about a certain subject matter. For those who do want to become writers, I hope to make them understand the process and learn through mistakes and to infuse them with my own feelings that it's a wonderful life. <sup>8</sup>

Students will produce original poetry and prose that will focus on their life experiences. The development of each student's own distinct voice will be emphasized. They will become familiar with a variety of writers in contemporary fiction and poetry including the following: Maya Angelou, Raymond Carver, Annie Dillard, Susan Donnelly, Stephen Dunning, Daniel Halpern, Kenneth Koch, Mary Oliver, Laurence Perrine, May Sarton, May Swenson, and Alice Walker.

Various methods will be used for achieving the writing goals. Students will write more prolifically with in-class exercises and homework assignments. They will learn to reshape, revise and polish their writings after they have been critiqued, as well as to evaluate the writings of their peers during the workshop sessions. These critical techniques are developed in the syllabus. See week #10. Students will have conferences with the teacher periodically in order to give them encouragement and specific helpful suggestions. I will discuss the writing with the student and tell how I reacted to it. In addition, I will suggest new directions for exploration such as "I think you could present the same idea in a poem." "Would you like to read some other stories that deal with the same theme?"

During each workshop session, I will introduce one of the prewriting techniques during the first three weeks. Then students can practice and use one or more of the techniques throughout the writing program. At the beginning of each daily session, students will write an exercise from Rico's *Writing the Natural Way*, or Macrorie's *Telling Writing*, or Elbow's *Writing With Power*. Students will write something that they enjoy on their own outside of class. A definite introduction example or model will be given for each writing exercise.

Students will do as much of the evaluation and correction of papers as possible. After the first draft, I will divide students into groups of two, four, or five members. Each group should include a mix of abilities from the class. The students are instructed to read carefully each other's writings. The important questions to ask of each person are: "What is effective and moving about this writing?" and "Does this writing work?" In the editing of student writings, a code system or a checklist for correcting sentence structure, grammar, usage and punctuation that the student is familiar with, should be followed consistently. Good systems are the correction symbols from *English Skills* by John Langan or the "Composition Checklist," a folder published by

Stratton-Christian press. At this time students will read the Macrorie, Elbow and Rico chapters on revision (these books are listed in the syllabus and bibliography). In the “critiquing sessions” peers should first say positive, encouraging comments about their classmate’s writing and then make suggestions for editing and rewriting. Students will be directed to mark on a separate piece of paper, all corrections and suggestions that should be made. Then the papers will be returned to the writers for them to edit, improve and make more effective. After rereading and correcting their drafts students will submit them to their teacher. The papers will have far fewer errors than they would without the peer “critiquing sessions.” Much time will be saved which can be used more productively to encourage more writing.

Students will want to express themselves if they are given opportunities to write creatively, if the teacher tries to uplift their spirits, and if they are made aware of what the writing program hopes to accomplish for them. Stimulating personal topics and reading selections that evoke thought and imagination will compel students to write. Peter Dickenson, who recently wrote *Tefuga*, expresses it best: “The imagination is like the sea, full of things you can’t see but can possibly harvest and use.” Every student of average intelligence can learn to write well. If the student lacks the self-esteem necessary to express himself and relapses into a laissez faire attitude, then the teacher must strive to instill in him the confidence that he can master good writing. The teacher must help him persist in the face of apparent futility by giving him consistent encouragement. The teacher must prove to him that what seemed impossible to do yesterday is possible today. Moreover, the teacher must try not to overwhelm him by pointing out or fussing over too many grammatical mistakes.

But writing itself is one of the great, free human activities. There is scope for individuality, and elation, and discovery, in writing. For the person who follows with trust and forgiveness what occurs to him, the world remains always ready and deep, an inexhaustible environment, with the combined vividness of an actuality and flexibility of a dream. Working back and forth between experience and thought, writers have more than space and time can offer. They have the whole unexplored realm of human vision. <sup>9</sup>

## Syllabus for Writing Course

Texts: *Writing the Natural Way*, Gabriele Rico  
*Telling Writing*, Ken Macrorie  
*Writing With power*, Peter Elbow  
*Story and Structure*, edited by Laurence Perrine  
*Maya Angelou: Poems*, Maya Angelou  
*You Can’t Keep a Good Woman Down*, Alice Walker  
*Eve Names the Animals*, Susan Donnelly  
*American Primitive*, Mary Oliver

Week #1: We will start with making a list and free writing techniques. Also students will work through the exercises in the reading assignment: *Writing the Natural Way*, chapter 1; *Telling Writing*, chapter 1.

Students will work together in small groups on a group paragraph. Write about a favorite place you have lived for homework.

Week #2: Brainstorming and clustering techniques will be introduced, played and worked with. *Writing the Natural Way*, chapter 2. In *The Stories of John Cheever*, “O City of Broken Dreams,” p. 42. In *Cathedral* “Chef’s House,” p. 448. Write a description of a place from memory.

Week #3: Modeling technique will be introduced and practiced. Cluster and write a portrait (with poetry or prose) of someone you admire, are fascinated by, or you love, or hate. *Writing the Natur*

al Way, chapter 2; *Telling Writing*, chapter 2. In *Maya Angelou: Poems*, Part One. In *You Can't Keep a Good Woman Down*, "The Lover," p. 31.

Week #4: Cluster and write a wind poem—North, South, East or West or a prose piece on an interesting or dull job you once had. Read five poems from Mary Oliver's *American primitive* and Part Two from *Maya Angelou: Poems*. Find a poem you enjoy, to read to the class. *Writing the Natural Way*, chapter 3; *Telling Writing*, chapter 3.

Week #5: Write a poem or prose piece to create the character of a person who intrigues you. Revise your description of a place piece. Revise your wind poem. *Writing the Natural Way*, chapter 4. In *Eve Names the Animals*, Part 1. In *Cathedral*, "A Small Good Thing", p. 59.

Week #6: Write a poem or prose piece on a childhood experience using precise or vivid details. *Writing the Natural Way*, chapter 5. In *Story and Structure*, "The Child by Tiger," p. 24; "Paul's Case." p. 176; "The Drunkard," p. 275. Read my prose piece in class, "Childhood Memories."

Week #7: Write several pages of observations, associations, thoughts, experiences, or descriptions in your own "authentic voice" in a journal form. Try to sound like yourself. *Writing the Natural Way*, chapter 6; *Telling Writing*, chapter 4; *Writing With Power*, chapter 2. In *Journal of Solitude* by May Sarton, pp. 11-24.

Week #8: Revise any of your previous writings. Write two pages of observations, associations, thoughts experiences, or descriptions in someone else's voice. Using the journal form, pretend you are someone else. (For example, your boyfriend, your mother, your father, or relative or any public figure or star. Try to express how this person views his experiences or observations. *Writing the Natural Way*, chapter 7, *Telling Writing* chapter 5. In *Pilgrim at Tinker Creek* by Annie Dillard, chapters 1 and 2.

Week #9: Write a character description from your memory. Use any writing technique which is effective for you. Try to create for your readers an authentic and interesting person. Write in the first person, third, or omniscient point of view. Include a setting that is related to the character. Show the character in action. Use precise and sharp dialogue. Strive to have it "strike its own sparks and sound its small explosions." You may include a flashback to a previous time to reveal your character. Read: *Writing the Natural Way*, chapter 8; In *You Can't Keep a Good Woman Down*, Elethia." p. 27, "Advancing Luna and Ida B. Wells," p. 85. In *Cathedral*, "Cathedral," p. 209. Also, I will read my short story entitled "Ric".

Week #10: We will revise our short stories this week. peer evaluators will use the following guide to comment and make suggestions on their classmates' stories. On the paper, mark carefully sentence, punctuation and grammar errors, virtues and defects. Answer the following questions thoughtfully, carefully, helpfully and completely as possible:

1. Is the setting important to the story? Explain.
2. Are voices distinguished in the dialogue?
3. Is there enough detail—too much?
4. Is the conclusion important to you as a reader? Explain.
5. What is the most moving part of this writing? Explain.
6. Does the title provide a “hook” or offer a clue to the main idea or theme?
7. Where does the story work best?
8. Is there anything unclear? Should more information be provided?
9. Should anything be cut or changed?
10. What did you learn from this story?
11. Any general comments?

Read: *Writing the Natural Way* , chapter 11; *Telling Writing* , chapters 8 and 9; *Writing With Power* , chapter 5.

Week #11: Write three vignettes in prose or in a journal describing your fears, conflicts, problems, worries, wishes and fantasies. Tell me or fold them over in your writing book if you do not want me to read them. *Writing the Natural Way* , chapter 9. Finish *American primitive* . In *Story and Structure* , “Death of a Traveling Salesman” by Endora Welty, p. 419.

Week #12: Find a poem in *Maya Angelou: Poems* or May Swenson’s *Half Sun Half Sleep* , or *American Primitive* , or *Goodnight, Willie Lee, I’ll See You in the Morning* , or *Eve Names The Animals* to read to the class. Also, find a poem in one of the above that captures a certain feeling, a kind of life, or an idea about life to model your own poem after. *Writing the Natural Way* , chapter 10.

Week #13: An exercise in precise observation, careful listening and sequential dialogue. Go to a restaurant, classroom, gym, beauty parlor, supermarket, or anyplace you feel comfortable. Write down words you hear people speak in a dialogue. Notice the repetition of phrases people speak. Note the way people try to be funny. Note indirect responses—how people talk from their own preoccupations. Catch the idioms. Try to catch lines that tell us something we wouldn’t have thought of about the people. Tell what you think of this conversation. Is it boring, interesting, amusing, clever, flat or what? Read: *Writing the Natural Way* , chapter 12. In *Story and Structure* , “Miss Brill,” p. 453; “A Mother’s Tale,” p. 318; “Greenleaf,” p. 222.

Week #14: You are encouraged to hand in free work which may earn extra credit, or develop

another kind of writing, or one kind of assignment more extensively than another. Write a poem about an animal. You may use any of May Swenson's, Mary Oliver's, Maya Angelou's or Susan Donnelly's poems for modeling. I will read my poem "Two Iguanas," "The Night so Bright a Squirrel Reads," by Thomas Lux and "Uninvited Guest" by Barbara Goehrig. Try to capture the animal's life very precisely and how it affects your feelings.

Week #15: Bring to class an outline for a story that involves a change in the character that you are interested in writing. Consider point-of-view, setting, characters and occurrences. The change should grow from the character's life and behavior. Finish the first draft of your story for homework. Read in *Story and Structure* "That Evening Sun" by William Faulkner.

Last Week: Writing will be a reworking of already written work. Discussion of what to include in your folder of best work. You will revise, rewrite, polish, arrange and title your portfolio or booklet. There will be a class reading of four of your best works.

## Notes

---

1 William Zinsser, *On Writing Well* (New York: Harper and Row, 1976), pp. 3, 4.

2 Donald Murray, *A Writer Teaches Writing* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1968), p. 70.

3 Sandra Schor and Judith Fishman, *Random House Guide to Writing* 2nd ed. (New York: Random House, 1981), p. 7.

4 Peter Elbow, *Writing Without Teachers* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1973), p. 28.

5 Gene Stanford and Marie Smith, *A Guidebook for Teaching Composition* 2nd ed. (Boston: Allyn and Bacon, 1982), p. 129.

6 Walter I. Lamberg, *Classroom Practices in Teaching English 1977-78: Teaching the Basics-Really!* (Urbana, Ill.: NOTE, 1977), pp. 30, 31.

7. Louise Hill Graham and Miriam Kleimer Young, *Writing Power* (New York: Globe Book Co., 1980), p. 7.

8 Nina Darnton, "Taking Risks: The Writer as Effective Teacher" *New York Times Education Magazine*, April, 1986, pp. 66.

9 William Stafford, *Poets on Poetry: Views on the Writer's Vocation* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1984), p. 20.



## Student and Teacher Bibliography

---

Most of the following books were used in doing research in writing this unit. They are good reference and classroom books for both the teacher and the students. Books especially relevant for students are marked with an asterisk.\*

\*Angelou, Maya. *Maya Angelou: Poems* . New York: Bantam Books, 1986.

A complete collection of all of Angelou's poems for students to become familiar with. These poems can be used for inspiration and modeling, and to help students unlock their feelings.

Brande, Dorothea. *Becoming a Writer* . Boston: Houghton Mifflin Co., 1961.

This book gives specific advice and exercises to help writers develop their talents and overcome writer's block.

\*Carver, Raymond. *Cathedral* . New York: Vintage Books, 1984.

An excellent book of short stories for students to use as inspiration by a teacher of creative writing on the faculty of Syracuse University.

\*Dillard, Annie. *Pilgrim at Tinker Creek* . New York: Harper and Row, 1974.

This is a journal of Dillard's explorations over one year in the Roanoke Valley of Virginia. A good model for students to try to imitate—her power of precise observations, vivid descriptions, memorable associations, and references to authors and readings.

\*Donnelly, Susan. *Eve Names the Animals* . Boston: Northeastern University Press, 1985.

An inspiring poetry book. The 1984 Morse Poetry Prize winner provides inspiration for students to write their own poetry.

\*Elbow, Peter. *Writing With Power: Techniques for Mastering the Writing Process* . New York: Oxford University Press, 1981.

———. *Writing Without Teachers* . London: Oxford University Press, 1973.

Two valuable research and activity books which emphasize writing principles and essential exercises to achieve powerful writing.

Emig, Janet. *The Composing Process of Twelfth Graders* . Urbana, Ill.: NCTE, 1971.

A study of the composing process of a selected group of twelfth grade writers, using a case study method to gain information through student's autobiographies of what occurs during their writing experiences. Emig challenges teachers to teach composition more creatively and to emphasize more reflexive writing, such as journals and personal stories.

\*Flower, Linda. *Problem Solving Strategies for Writing* . New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1985.

This book explains many guidelines and principles that underlie good writing and offers effective strategies for solving writing problems.

Graham, Louise Hill, and Miriam Kleiner Young. *Writing Power*. New York: Globe Book, 1980.

Some sure-fire, practical applications of the brainstorming technique are offered in this book.

\*Horton, Susan R. *Thinking Through Writing* . Baltimore, Maryland: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1982.

This book is a “watch yourself think” guide. It is designed to help writing students arrange ideas so that they can discover how writing works, and in the process how their minds work.

York: Random House, 1973.

\*———. *Wishes, Lies, and Dreams*. New York: Harper and Row, 1970.

Two valuable books that describe methods for students to read “great poetry” and then to be inspired to write their own poetry. Also the two books include many of the poems Koch’s students wrote.

Langdon, John. *English Skills* . New York: McGraw-Hill, 1977.

In this “nuts and bolts” book, writing is introduced as a process including prewriting, revising and editing. Many varied activities and assignments are accompanied with “step-by-step” instructions in the process of writing.

Macrorie, Ken. *Telling Writing* . New Jersey: Boynton/Cook Publishers, 2nd edition, 1976.

Macrorie’s valuable book gives effective advice for good writing and analyzes what powerful writing is.

\*Simons, George F. *Keeping Your Personal Journal* . New York: Paulist Press, 1978.

This book gives stimulating advice on the process of journal writing—as a tool for growth, learning, observing life, and writing vividly.

Stanford, Gene and Marie Smith. *A Guidebook for Teaching Composition* . Boston: Allyn and Bacon, 1982.

\*Walker, Alice. *Good Night , Willie Lee, I’ll See You in the Morning* . New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1979.

A book of poetry by the Pulitzer Prize-Winning Author of *The Color Purple* for students to use for modeling inspiration.

\*———. *You Can’t Keep a Good Woman Down* . New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1981.

A collection of fourteen interesting and skillful stories for students to become familiar with and, perhaps use for modeling.

Wixon, Vincent and Pat Stone. *English Journal* , 66 (September, 1977), pp. 70-73.

\*Wolfe, Denny and Robert Reising. *Writing for Learning in the Content Areas* . Portland, Maine: J. Weston Walch, 1983.

This useful book is designed to show how writing is an effective tool in helping students to become more involved and active as learners. Particularly helpful chapters include: A Process Approach to Writing, Using a Journal, Writing to Accomplish Writing Goals, Evaluating Writing and Student Activities.

## Classroom Materials

---

*Writing for Power: 39 Activities to Build Persuasive Writing Skills* by Thomas A. Smith.

*Of Course You Can Write!* By Mary Terese Donze.

Carefully structured exercises and twenty-one worksheets on using specific elements of writing and successful writing patterns for students to model.

*The Student Writer Activity Book* by Bob Scrivens. These activities encourage students to think, observe and write about themselves and their experiences.

*125 Photos for English Composition Classes* by teacher/photographer H. I. Kellner. Each photo has a structured writing assignment printed on the back.

*Story Starters for Writing and Discussion* by Bob Scrivens. This book is effective with average and below-average students in grades seven to ten.

All of the above can be ordered from J. Weston Walch, Publisher, 321 Valley Street, P.O. Box 658, Portland, Maine 04104-0658.

*Composition Check-Lists* show how students can identify many of the errors on their papers, thus freeing the teacher to give more attention to style, meaning, organization and content. From Stratton-Christian Press, Inc. Box 1055, University Place Station, Des Moines, Iowa 50311-0055.

Videotape Series: *The English Modules* by Sarah D'Eloia, Barbara Gray, Blanche Skurnick, Mina Shavgnessy and Alice Trillin. Produced by New York Network, an affiliate of the State University of New York, 60 East 42nd Street, New York, N.Y. 10017.

---

<https://teachersinstitute.yale.edu>

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

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