



Writing for a Purpose in Senior College English

Curriculum Unit 86.04.02
by Marie Patricia Casey

I. The Writing Process

The objectives for this curriculum cover a year's work and come from my own perceptions of the needs of the students I presently teach. These students are at Hillhouse High School and are all, with few exceptions, minority in race. In this urban school, the junior and senior college English classes are reading at least two years behind grade level, while others in the same class are more than four years behind. The writing skills of the majority of these students are also well below grade level. Furthermore, even in senior year, these students have considerable problems in constructing essays. There is one big difference, however, which these upperclassmen show: they are now aware of their own needs and deficiencies in expression and truly desire, on the whole, to improve their writing skills. Thus, they often ask directly for help.

With this assessment of student skills in mind, I have planned this unit around the stages of writing essays to make it possible for them to meet their desires to write clearly and logically and express what they truly want to say in clear and logical prose. In her book *Writing The Natural Way*, Gabriele Rico presents a method of teaching writing which emphasizes the generation of ideas and thoughts, and advancing from the creating stage to the organizing stage. The technique of clustering is entirely new in its approach to writing; its practicality has been an exciting outcome of this seminar on writing. A second book, *Errors and Expectations*, by Mina Shaughnessy, has struck at another main problem: that is the problem of trying to improve the grammar skills which revolve around the many idiosyncratic mistakes the students make in writing. Two of the most outstanding errors occur in sentence structure: first, they use fragments; second, they make mistakes in sentence logic. They also have difficulty with correct spelling.

Out of these recent approaches to writing, what is truly new and what is old, and already known? Writing is still viewed as a four-stage process:

1. Getting the ideas;
2. Organizing the thoughts;
3. Writing them clearly and logically; and
4. Correcting the final version. These stages are the same that Rico and Shaughnessy teach, yet they have been around for years. So what do they offer that is so valuable to understanding and teaching the writing process?

Both Rico and Shaughnessy stress the first two stages more than they ever have been before. In the activities of generating and realizing one's thoughts, lie the systems for organizing and writing them out clearly and cogently. Thus they emphasize the need to work carefully and cogently. Thus they emphasize the need to work carefully and fully on the generation stage—the accumulation of opinions, responses, thoughts, and ideas. Before one can attempt to write his ideas into logical sentences and paragraphs, and thus essays, one must have a good grasp on what these ideas are and how they interact (and thus lay a foundation for logical progression in the essay). Most of my students have their biggest problem finding out what they want to say in their essays and they make the mistake of proceeding to write while they are still muddled in their thoughts. Thus they are struggling to use writing to find out what they think, rather than to organize and present what they already have discovered that they think, through other methods. The combination of being muddled in thought and trying to write the essay, while also being correct and logical, is overwhelming to most of them and they soon come to a crashing halt—feeling quite defeated and once again unable to write. At this point, in a panic, they often approach the teacher because they can't "write." It is this unproductive process that I am trying to remove, and replace with Rico's and Shaughnessy's more realistic and successful approach.

A person cannot build a bookcase without supplies, or make a meal without ingredients, nor can an essay be written without all of the ideas, opinions, and facts at hand, set aside and within reach. Rico's book not only gives emphasis to this pre-writing or idea generation stage; it gives much needed insight and information on where and how these ideas and opinions are generated. Most importantly, Rico's book involves a process that draws upon the knowledge that a person already has within him/herself for writing. The "idea generation" stage structures a process that opens up personalized self-expression right from the start. The major technique by which Rico opens up students to their ideas is called "clustering."

Clustering acknowledges and draws out the information the student already possesses, but may not be aware of. Based on research into the creative activities of the mind, Rico's book structures an activity called "clustering"—something like brain storming—but more to the point it is a process that gives free play to right side of the brain.

Piaget, the Swiss developmental psychologist, offers this insight into what the writing process involves: the ability to read and write sensitively, thoughtfully, and independently (presuppose) the ability to formulate and solve problems. Then, according to Piaget, the ability to solve a problem depends in a large part upon his (the student's) ability to explore and revise his internal world, to examine data thoroughly and to reformulate the questions he poses.

This is just what the clustering process does for the student, it enables him to explore and revise his internal world. Clustering brings out what the student knows and gives him/her something to write about.

This paper presents the writing process in three stages. First and foremost comes the accumulation of facts, opinions, and ideas gathered by the students, using Rico's clustering method, as well as other methods of idea generation (see Lesson Plan I.) This stage must occur *before* the student attempts to write, and needs to have enough time given to it that students recognize clearly the importance of generating ideas to other stages of writing. It is important to note here that the seeds of organization of an essay occur even in the generating state, for as students begin to discover their thoughts, they will also begin to discover the relationship between them. This logical relationship is what they seek to communicate in an essay, and thus gives an essay its structure. Without this generation stage, students can't organize their thoughts, because they don't know what they are. Even more importantly, they can't recognize the organization implicit in their thoughts,

because these thoughts are not spread out in front of them.

Thus the second stage is to see the innate relationships between ideas and thus a system for essay organization. This stage involves finding a focus for their essay, and placing all other ideas in relation to it. Essay writing at this point will progress according to the logic or sense that they see in their ideas. Focus needs to be stressed here, for some students will need individual help either in sticking to the main point, or even in identifying the purpose for which they are writing. Individual conferences are the key here.

Who is the audience—the guidance department at a college, or an employer? What is the overall message to be communicated? In every case, an organized, logical, piece of writing showing understanding of the assigned subject is called for. However, at this point there will still be some who hesitate committing anything to paper because of their fear of error. They have already looked ahead into the third stage: they have written and each sentence is full of mistakes. Indeed their fears are well grounded. Some students, even in senior year, cannot write a single sentence without a number of spelling and grammatical errors. They will, therefore, freeze at even stage two—(organizing their thoughts)—because when they organize their thoughts, they will write them out and be “wrong” again. Nevertheless, if the students know that there is going to be support and acknowledgement that they make grammatical error—that all authors do in the gennuative and first draft stages—they will go ahead and write, mistakes and all.

Support is the key word here. Once they feel that what they are about to say has purpose and meaning, they will go ahead and write, if there is support to deal with their grammatical errors later. The separation of content and grammar is all important and should give the student more confidence and more sense of control over his/her own writing. (If possible, any correction of student writing in the beginning of the year, should be done with the writer, present so that he/she can observe and take over—what the student has always left to the realm of others—looking at his/her own mistakes and fixing them him/herself.)

There is a pitfall, however, in dismissing grammar and spelling altogether. It is not helpful to say that mistakes do not matter, because neither the students nor the teachers find this credible. A teacher’s message that what you have to say is just as important as how you say it, is meaningful and helpful at first because it relieves the student of his anxiety. But the student does not, in the end, want to be making mistakes. They need, help, then in the third stage to learn how to correct the errors they do make. These students are often well aware, by this time, of the traps they have fallen into in their past writings.

The problem I have found in the third stage, right after the first writing, is that the students want the teacher to completely take over all the correction of grammar, as though they (the students) know nothing at all about such matters. Here’s where the students must learn to take over the role of teacher for themselves. Here’s where many teachers too, have taken the area of grammar as though they (the teachers) were the only ones to know what a sentence is, or which word is spelled correctly. The student, in many cases, seems to be the helpless bystander, as the corrector goes over the paper. This dependent process has to change to an independent, responsible one through, peer correction, student/teacher conferences, and an analogy of common errors.

All the work the student has done in stages 1 & 2, discovery and expression will still be inadequate if he cannot use language correctly. In the third stage of writing, student must have the grammatical rules under control in his written expression. Yet this “editor” stage must not interfere with the “creator-writer” stage. It is the end of the process of writing—correct expression and skill in language—not the beginning.

The second major area this paper addresses are the kinds of mistakes most frequently made by these

students and what is the best way to define these mistakes and overcome them, thus giving the students the tools for adequate expression in their writing.

I think it's important to acknowledge that this process of independence in grammar control is going to take time. There are a few methods which I found to work well this past year, in creating this "independence," in a journalism class. The situation was sufficiently informal for me to try new things with students. First, I always refused to correct a paper for mistakes in grammar that had not been corrected for the first time by the student himself, or a friend of that student. This process alone acknowledges that the students know more about grammar than they use when writing. This approach always delegates responsibility to the person who really is ultimately responsible for the mistakes. Finally, self-correction and peer correction is the beginning of control and appreciation of writing as a craft. Second, I stressed looking up words in the dictionary. Third, I narrowed mistakes down to two main areas: sentences structure and spelling. After the first few essays were written and there was a feeling of comfort that showed the students gaining control in these two areas, it was then possible to look at other areas of rewriting. One was changing words to make a more powerful statement. Over the period of a year, there was enormous progress in this class in all three stages of writing, but perhaps the most exciting was the grammatical control that the students developed. They used grammar books to look up usage questions, and were definitely interested in being as correct as they were capable of before they handed in any paper. Through this experience in journalism, it seems clear to me that grammar should always be taught in connection with or as a result of student writing. Otherwise, it seems to be a meaningless and disconnected subject, with very little transfer to actual writing.

I propose to give a diagnostic test to define for each student the areas of grammar to concentrate on in his/her writing. This test is in no way designed as a grading devise; it is diagnostic only. (see test on file at the Yale Institute.) The helpfulness of such an approach has really been brought home to me by Mina Shaughnessy's book *Errors and Expectations*. Shaughnessy goes on to list four common grammatical concepts which underlie most mistakes. The first is the sentence fragment and misunderstandings in the logic necessary to the development of a sentence: a sentence has a structure, much like a building has beams and additions. The second is the use of inflections -s, es and ed; and the third is tense. Last comes subject-verb and reference-pronoun agreement.

In order to have students master the form appropriate for written English I will focus on agreement and the correct use of verb forms, pronouns and modifiers. Concepts such as agreement of subject and verb, irregular verb forms, pronouns agreement and placement of modifiers will be taught at these weekly sessions. One of my goals will be to help students and to improve sentence skills in their writing. I will do pre and post-testing, with units of work to assess student progress in eliminating sentence fragment, runons and improving sentence skills. Students will keep a chart of pretest score, post-test scores and mastery.

II. Applying the Process

From an understanding of the stages of the writing process, we will move into writing actual full-length essays, which will begin on a personal, descriptive, level and move into essays more complex and argumentative in nature.

These essays will be taught over a period of a year, because there is a cumulative effect as the children become more proficient in clustering. The longest essay, the term paper is an enlargement of the clustering

process, involving many points of view appropriately connected and clustered many times over. I think the clustering process should be used not only to expand on ideas but also to overcome writing blocks which will occur for students at any time. Also, I propose to use clustering in terms of the images in literature. This could be used in *Ethan Frome Hamlet* and *Heart of Darkness*, which are all part of the English suggested readings.

Below are the objectives for the kinds of essays I expect students to be capable of writing by the end of a year's work. All of the essays presume a knowledge of the four stages of the writing process. As students successfully master each stage, they will come closer with each writing activity to achieving clear, logical essays with good expression and correct grammar.

1. to write small essays for applications to colleges and for work applications.
2. to write longer essays on personal goals and plans for the future.
3. to write essays of opinion on personal or school events and also on world issues.
4. to write term papers with documented sources and bibliographies.
5. to write with understanding of the characters presented in literature and to develop more understanding of the imagery used in literature. (Using Rico).
6. to write feature articles for the school newspaper based on personal interviews.
7. to decide on a topic and focus on that topic for the length of the exercise, whether it is an essay or a term paper.

Along with all of the above skills comes an ability to look for and find books and/or magazines on their topics. The student should absorb the library skills to do research and finally, to take notes, to read and digest, to paraphrase and to take direct quotes.

Therefore, the overall principle behind these objectives for this paper is to approach all of writing for a purpose with a certain ease and confidence and to correct their own errors in two main areas—sentence structure and spelling.

The newest or most exciting development in the teaching of writing comes from Rico's book *Writing the Natural Way*, which suggests that the most effective and meaningful writing comes from the use of the right (mute) side of the brain. This part of the brain is the center of our creative ideas. Formerly, the right part of the brain was considered mute, having little to do with the use of language and the writing of words. Lately, research suggests that the process of writing, the conceiving of ideas, the "seeing" of wholeness, and the connectedness of ideas along with the formation of structure for a piece of writing, comes from this right side of the brain. Therefore, Rico states that effective writing is a result of the cooperation of the right (idea) side of the brain with the left side through the use of words.

The following lesson plans are devised using Rico's method of directing the hand to use the recall and powers

of unity that comes from the right side of the brain to compose and find ideas and structure, before writing itself begins.

Lesson Plan One—2 days

Objective *The student will write a short essay (for applying to College) on a person who has most influenced his/her life.*

Process *15 minute group activity done by the class as a whole*

1. Using the blackboard, have the students suggest a person known to all of them. Use Rico's method of placing the name in the center in a circle or oval.

(figure available in print form)

A. Ask the students to give suggestions or characteristics of personal appearance, then brainstorm any facts of his/her life. Write down all contributions in circles connected by lines to the main circle.

B. Ask the students to give words or expressions which they remember especially that the person *said* . Continue to write on board all the contributions of the students.

C. Ask students. Then, to give *reasons* that these expressions are so well remembered by them. Write reasons on the board, also in connected circles.

The students should now observe that there is a great deal of information on the board. This, of course solves their greatest problem—"What can I say?" All the information is on the board.

2. Ask the students now, to focus on the words "personal influence." This is the shift to the left side of the brain, to begin to see a structure, "see" the emergence of sentences a form for the essay.

A. After focusing, and as quickly as possible, ask students to begin putting the information on the board into sentences. Write their sentences on the board. Try to stress, the focus of "personal influence."

B. When the paragraph is on the board, ask for a quick correction or review of any errors or changes they see.

C. Give homework assignment to think of a person that has had an influence on their life. Have this person in mind for class activity the next day.

Lesson Plan One Day 2

Objective *Individual repetition of the group work the day before.*

Process *Each student writes the name of the person who has most influenced his/her life in a circle.*

1. Each student clusters or brainstorms for 3 to 5 minutes on the personal characteristics, quietly writing or connecting remarks in circles, to the main circle, focusing on facts and appearance.
2. For the next 5 minutes the student focuses on clustering expressions of wisdom, or things most remembered said or done by this person.
3. For 2 or 3 minutes have the students focus on *why* the words or actions of that person are most remembered by them. Cluster these reasons.
Walk around the room and see that each student is able to participate and give encouragement where necessary.
4. At this point, ask for a volunteer from the class who would be willing to put their clustering on the board so that the class as a whole can move into the next stage through this individuals work. (If this is not possible, repeat the clustering that was on the board the day before.) Describe this stage to the class, as a shift in thinking—look for a sense of form, a sense of composition, a forming in their minds of a logical arrangement for these circled words into sentences. The design or arrangement is different for each one. There is no one right arrangement—only one which makes sense to them. The one key to the individual arrangement into sentences is the focus of the essay—“personal influence.”
5. Begin writing as quickly as possible for ten to fifteen minutes.
6. Before collecting the papers for teachers review, ask students to exchange papers for a brief review—looking for sentence fragments or spelling mistakes.
7. An important process is to read aloud (with student permission) papers from the class—This reading aloud gives ideas to other students and greatly encourages others, when they perceive their peers achieving success.
8. After teacher correction, have the student rewrite the essay and save in a folder for future use or reference.

Lesson Plan Two-Two Days

Day one

Objective *The student will write a longer essay (also for college applications) on personal goals and plans for the future.*

Preparation *Talk with the students about values clarification, in relation to their wishes and dreams about their lives.*

Procedure *(This lesson plan assumes that the teacher and students are familiar with the word clustering and have gone through this process at least once.)*

1. Put the words money, power, sex, love, happiness, fame, helping others, on the board.

(figure available in print form)

2. As a group, cluster each word. Write on board the student comments or feelings on each word. This will probably take most of the period. Keep reminding the students that they are making comments about their wishes and dreams.
3. At their desk, have each student pick two or three clusters from the board—the most personally motivating. Write significant thoughts from the board and for 5 to 10 minutes, continue to cluster quietly at their desk all the additional thoughts which come to their minds about these words.
4. Collect these clusters, to be handed back the next day.

Lesson Plan Two-Day 2

Preparation *Discuss specific career choices. Get pamphlets from guidance department on careers, ROTC, also High School Magazines on Careers from counselors. Finally, write the following words on the board and circle each one: Computer field, fashion, accounting, graphics, auto mechanics, lawyer, journalist, and nursing. Tell the students these are just ideas—the main point is make a choice that they feel they can be specific about, the choice should be the one which has the most ideas for them right now.*

Procedure

1. For ten minutes, each student clusters the career of his/her choice, writing facts, feelings which connect them to this career.
 - If needed, read aloud or write the following questions on the board.
 - a. Why do you like this career?
 - b. Do you know someone who does this? Write the person's name. Why would you choose to follow in his/ her footsteps?
 - c. Do you see yourself doing this?

- d. How do you feel when you are doing this activity and what makes you want to do it?
 - e. Have you taken courses at Hillhouse which have led you to choose this career? List the courses.
2. Return papers from Day one of this lesson—clustering on values clarification.
 3. Using both clusters, have the students focus on both of these clusters quietly, until they see a structure for their essay begin to form. Repeat the focus “personal goals and plans for the future”.
 4. Instruct the student to write as quickly as possible, to get all the material down, without worrying about mistakes in grammar or spelling. Just get as much written as possible, using the material from the two clusters, focusing all the while on the theme.
 5. Once the essay is written, try to use peer review or group correction—especially on sentence fragments and spelling mistakes, before the essay is handed in for teacher review. This kind of peer review, or personal review, especially in senior year, helps the student feel even more in control of his/her writing and enhances both their confidence and creativity.

Lesson Plan Three

Objective *The student will write an essay of opinion on personal opinion or school events.*

The writing of the essay of personal opinion is vital not only to the student’s development as a writer, but to the student personally. They have a great need to express themselves and to be able to do so in writing gives them a tremendous sense of power and personal satisfaction.

Procedure *This lesson plan is developed from Rico’s chapter on Creative Tension and seeks to help the student explore the opposite of his/her opinion, before beginning to write.*

Focus for this lesson *Understanding and presenting the opposite point of view, strengthens and clarifies your own point of view.*

Preparation *Although the student initially feels that he/she knows full well what he/she wants to say, I have found that he/she becomes disappointed and unable to write after the first few sentences, because—the student becomes repetitious, circular and trapped by only presenting his/her point of view, or only one side.*

This can be avoided by asking the student to bring into focus through clustering for themselves the opposite of what they are writing about, because this process clarifies, in their minds, their own remarks.

For example: Any conflict has by its very nature at least two sides. Have the students imagine a dialogue in cluster form of the opposing view. For this dialogue we have 3 focuses: first, the argument; second the student's opinion; thirdly, the administrator's opinion.

Procedure Present these three examples and cluster them.

Example 1: A. Argument: Should a student be admitted to school after 8:30 without a note or call from a parent?

(figure available in print form)

Example 2: A. Argument: Apartheid in Africa is wrong. Article from Time magazine distributed, and notes taken. Try to see (as a class) if the author has presented her own position as well as the position of both sides in South Africa.

Example 3: A. When a student has reached the legal age of eighteen, how much more freedom should he/she have at home? Is it all right to defy parents wishes, at this point, on staying out whenever he/she wishes and are parents justified in keeping house rules? Is this a public rule of private?

(figure available in print form)

If necessary try a small debate acted out by two students in class on the same issues so that students can observe that their own opinions and problems are clarified by listening to an argument.

1. Cluster the arguments on the board. Opposing points of view bring the argument into focus, and clarify, and strengthen, a stand to be taken. Understanding the opposite point of view strengthens the argument.
2. Begin writing by taking a stand on the issue.
3. Ask for at least five statements both for and against the opening stand the student wants to take.
4. Write the composition as an answer to the opposition's stand.

Lesson Plan 4 Images—Day One

Objective *The student will write with understanding of the images of the characters presented in literature.*

Presentation *The characters in book, (Ethan Frome—Mattie, Zeena, and Ethan. Read the first*

half of the book before presenting this lesson.

Process Look for fine descriptive phrases which give an image of each character. Quote the phrase, and give the page number for each excerpt. Image is the key word for word picture, the picture in words of the character.

1. Explain to the class that images are the true language of the right side of the brain which recognizes and identifies all our complex thoughts before they even become known or verbalized or conscious to ourselves. For example, how do we know someone is near us—we sense it. How do we know someone is in pain, or someone is afraid—we sense it. We look at him/her and the image presented and we digest, like a computer on the right side of the brain and we “know”. We recognize feelings and we understand situations because of this more primitive (right-brained) informed side of our brain. So too, this same knowledge is transferred to our senses when we read descriptions of the characters in literature.

The study of *Ethan Frome* is particularly valuable when teaching images to students. The book is abundant in imagery and obvious in its symbolism. Its very simplicity clarifies the images for students. The very first description of Ethans in the Prologue. The “picture”, the image of Ethan Frome is wounded, silent, stern, and hardened by struggle. Townspeople do not even dare to bother him. From this first picture we image, we sense the character of Ethan. Relate this to the student’s own street recognition of people or strangers. How can just looking at a person tell you a great deal about him/her? This exercise is easy for students at Hillhouse. I find them rich in their knowledge of human beings behavior and human motivation. Most of them have sharpened their skills at looking at and understanding people in the street and in the home. They already know and understand the many complexities of human life and need only a way to translate this knowledge of people to the characters in literature.

Day 2

Objective To introduce archetypal images to students.

They are meaningful to all men across the ages as human beings and have occurred again and again in written literature and in the dreams of ordinary men.

1. Water-symbolizes life and birth.
2. Desert-symbolizes sterility and lifelessness.
3. Spilled Blood-symbolizes death.
4. Earth Mother-symbolizes nurturing, protective, fertile.
5. The Monster-symbolizes what we fear most, possibly something in ourselves.
6. The shadow-symbolizes our dark side, our repressed self.
7. Tree-symbolizes life.
8. Flying-symbolizes transcending the body’s limitations, also (from the myth of Icarus) separation from a parent, of disobedience and its consequences.
9. A lake-symbolizes the unconscious and also life-giving water.

Psychologist C. Jung says that these images lie in our collective unconscious and disturb or involve us because they strike at the core of our life here on earth and have meaning for central issues of death, sexuality, abandonment, freedom, etc. These images occur in our dreams and in many writings.

Procedure To introduce the three dominant images in *Ethan Frome* Winter, Death, and Light.

1. Ask the student to cluster these images separately for themselves.
2. Ask the students to cluster these images in terms of the book—through close reading of the book.

In terms of the book, the author closely associates “winter” with the isolation, the struggle, and loneliness that the main character Ethan endures. The student must investigate the mind of the author by close reading of the book to find references to these words.

Death: The student must recognize that Ethan passes the cemetery (death) of his ancestors each day on the way to his house; the vine which swings across his door looks (to him) like black crepe hung for mourning, etc. These are not only images but they are an artful way of foreshadowing the tragic end of the book.

Light: The only references to light are made about the main character Mattie and indeed, she is the only light of Ethan’s life. It will probably be necessary to tell the students to look directly, in close reading, at only passages connected to Mattie, for the symbol of light and warmth.

3. Use the clustering of the images of death, winter and light that the student clustered first for him/her self, along with the clustering of lines taken directly from the book done with close reading on the images of death, winter and light.
4. Focus on the personal view of the student and author try to see a unifying thought from the two clusters.
5. After the unifying thought emerges, write a short essay on each image. The result should be a satisfying combination of personalized expression of the imagery in *Ethan Frome* .
6. Day three—or homework assignment is to finish writing 3 separate essays on death, winter and light, using two clusters for each essay. Read aloud essays which are well focused and personalized.
7. Exchange papers to look for errors in sentence structure and spelling.
8. Rewrite essays, refining word use, and concentrating on main focus (individualized for each student).
9. Tell the students that each of these symbols could possibly be enlarged through further close reading in the book to a term paper on a literary topic—a major accomplishment in senior year.

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