

# Writing to Learn German

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The ultimate goal of foreign language instruction is to teach students the skills needed to communicate in the foreign language. For this, students need insight into cultural and historical phenomena, as well as knowledge of grammatical functions. They need to trust their teacher and classmates before they will be willing to speak another language and make the mistakes that nonnative speakers are bound to make. And speaking in the foreign language is essential because students must move from acquisition to application of skills.

Writing-to-learn techniques help students begin to communicate successfully in the foreign language, reducing students' fears of making errors and looking dumb. In addition, writing to learn helped students understand grammatical functions, historical events, and cultural phenomena. In this chapter I will describe how my students write to improve speaking, to learn grammar, to simulate real-life situations, and to understand cultural concepts.

## Organizing

The foundation for use of writing-to-learn techniques in my classes was the **journal**. The journal, a three-ring binder, was a student log of activities as well as a place to record thought processes. Students also kept handouts such as song sheets and news articles in the journal. The journal organized students physically, an obvious advantage. It also organized students mentally; if they were unable to record their thoughts on paper, they knew their understanding was weak, and they would seek help. Students knew they would write on a daily basis and came to realize that daily writing projects would help them reach the goal of a lesson. I used a partner system so that students would share their work on a regular basis and get feedback on it. For many, consistent use of the journal provided tangible evidence that each day was important

and that each activity was a stepping stone toward mastery of the unit.

Students dated and labeled each entry and kept work in chronological order. If we were working on command forms on Monday and Friday's assignment involved commands, students would often refresh their memories by going through their journals to review the week's notes and exercises. Before they began using journals, such a review would have been more difficult.

Since the journal contained expressive language, which tends to be personal, students preferred to review their own notes, rather than ask me to review material in class. Considering the number of interactions teachers have with students each hour, students and teachers can both benefit from a procedure that enables students to help themselves by relying on their own knowledge and records. The journals also helped the students who missed class; they could find out from classmates what the assignment was and ask me for additional help if necessary.

That the students valued the journal was especially clear to me the last week of school. As I collected the journals to review their content one last time, I mentioned that I might not be ready to give them back until the afternoon of the last day of school. Many concerned students came to me after class and during lunch to tell me how much they needed the journal and to ask if they could pick it up earlier. They genuinely desired to have and use the journal the following year, and some ambitious students wanted to use it over the summer vacation. Even graduating seniors came back to get their journals.

## Speaking Skills

Speaking skills receive the greatest emphasis in the foreign language classroom because achieving communicative competence requires making the transition from "skill-getting" to "skill-using." I want my students to control the German language, not have it control them. I often used writing-to-learn techniques in my classes to help students improve their oral German. These writing projects usually involved visual cues that the speaker and listener could use to increase understanding. These techniques provided "stepping stones" for the speaker reducing anxiety and assuring success.

One assignment in the beginning German class asked students to introduce themselves and each other. The chapter in our text introduced the vocabulary and provided a dialogue for using it. It also covered possessive pronouns and their endings. As we read various dialogues in the text, we made **lists** of characteristics we would need to describe people. They were divided according to categories: eye color, hair color,

favorite sport, favorite class, and so on. Students wrote all the possibilities, not just those that applied to them. The listing exercise helped reinforce what they had previously learned: spellings and meanings of words. After finishing the lists, students circled those items that applied to them. This allowed them to focus on the vocabulary they would need to introduce themselves.

We then began to produce cards that would be visual aids for speaking exercises. Students brought pictures of themselves from home; these were glued to five-by-seven-inch cards. They recorded on their cards what they perceived as the most important information about themselves. They were not allowed to write full sentences, only skeletal information, for example:

Name:	Konrad R. Whitney
Alter:	17 Jahre alt
Wohnort:	Tacoma, Washington, USA
Haarfarbe:	blond
Augenfarbe:	blau
Hobbies:	Malen, Wandern, Essen, Camping, Lesen, Sport
Lieblingssport:	Fussball, Korbball, Schwimmen, Football
Lieblingsfach:	Sport
Lieblingsgruppe:	Blue Oyster Cult

#### Translation

Name:	Konrad R. Whitney
Age:	17 years old
Residence:	Tacoma, Washington, USA
Hair color:	blond
Eye color:	blue
Hobbies:	drawing, hiking, eating, camping, reading, sports
Favorite sport:	soccer, basketball, swimming, football
Favorite subject:	sports
Favorite group:	Blue Oyster Cult

Before beginning the exercise, we reviewed subject-verb agreement with the verb “to like.” And I reminded the students that the listeners also had visual cues for comprehension, since the pictures and the person matched the vocabulary. They saw the word *fussball* on Konrad’s card at the same time they saw his blond hair and blue eyes.

Before students spoke to the class, they were given a few minutes to practice introducing themselves, with their partners as the audience. Students now had been led through all the steps to get to the goal of introducing themselves fluently and confidently.

During the introductions to the class, speakers were encouraged to use the cards as cues. Listeners were encouraged to ask questions of the speakers, just as would happen in real-life conversations. Students interacted very well; they were interested in learning about each other and in telling about themselves. The cue cards and the listmaking that led to the production of the cue cards fostered confidence.

When writing the cards, students had time to think through the project. They knew the goal, and they wanted to communicate accurate information. Their knowledge of the words and grammatical functions was reinforced as they made their lists and used the lists to make their own cards. As they moved to higher levels of thinking (the comprehension and application levels), students were able to depend on their writing to help them communicate orally with their peers. The speaking activity was not spontaneous, but it gave them practice for speaking in real-life situations.

Writing-to-learn techniques such as **brainstorming**, **clustering**, **lists**, and **first thoughts** can be used to assure successful communication. These techniques can help students complete the following traditional assignments.

Topic	Material
Traveling	Make a travel brochure of a place you’ve visited in Germany, Austria, Switzerland, or the United States. Use pictures and cue words, but not full sentences. You’ll use your brochure to introduce the travel destination to the class.
Breakfast Foods	Bring in pictures of your favorite German breakfast foods. Write an advertisement and use it to make an oral presentation to the class.

Sports	Bring in a picture of your favorite athlete. Write her or his biography and make an oral report to the class.
Party	Make invitations to a party. Include the following on the card: What the occasion is, When the party is, Where, and Who is invited to the party.

The advantage of writing-to-learn speaking is clear: students are communicating once when writing the information and again when speaking. The cue cards provide visual cues and are produced by students. Furthermore, they incorporate students' diverse interests. Materials can be used repeatedly by varying the actual speaking exercises to fit the goal of the specific lesson. For example, the cards students used to introduce themselves were used later in the year to discuss clothes, colors, and fashions. Students enjoyed seeing their classmates' cards and discussing them.

### Learning Grammar

Learning grammar is another goal in foreign language class. Many students get their first taste of grammar rules in the foreign language classroom. Some students apply grammatical concepts easily; others struggle continually with terms and concepts. Often students can repeat from memory how a given part of the sentence is defined, yet they cannot identify that part of the sentence or explain why one would need to know what part of the sentence a word is.

In German the speaker must know what part of the sentence each phrase is because the definite articles change to reflect the function of the nouns they precede. For example, in English the definite article remains the same regardless of the noun's function. While in German there are six choices of definite articles (*der, die, das, den, dem, and des*). Writing-to-learn exercises can help students understand this and other grammatical functions.

My favorite exercises for teaching grammar are **dictation** and vary-the-audience. For example, when I introduced students to the conversational past tense, I asked them to copy my definition of the tense. After they copied it, I explained it to them in greater detail and answered their questions. To confirm their understanding, I asked them to write in their journals how they would explain the conversational

past tense to a grade school child. Students occasionally explain concepts to classmates who have been absent, but to explain a concept to a young child, they need to use simple language with clear examples that reflect a thorough understanding of the concepts involved. This variation in audience made some students realize that they did not understand the concepts well enough to explain them to their peers, let alone to younger kids. Others realized how well they did comprehend tense, and they were able to help students who were having difficulty.

The dictation and vary-the-audience exercises were my favorite because I could monitor the students as they worked and get immediate feedback on their understanding and ability to apply concepts. Students did not have to flunk a test before they or I realized they needed help. The writing exercises helped them process the information and eventually master the concepts.

All of the work was done in the journal, and many students referred back to their grammar dictation and vary-the-audience exercises when working on composition assignments. They preferred to use their own work when they had questions rather than the textbook. In most situations, students were able to rely on themselves and on their partners when they needed to review previously covered material.

### **Writing in German**

Ultimately, of course, students should be able to complete real-life writing tasks in the foreign language. The following is an assignment I give to more advanced students who have developed speaking and grammar skills.

Write a letter (using the German format) to a person who does not know much about the landscape of northern Germany. Compare and contrast the landscape of the North with that of southern Germany. Convince your reader that the landscape of the North is as beautiful as that of the South. Use the conversational past tense where possible.

This assignment requires the ability to compare and contrast, as well as basic knowledge of vocabulary and application of grammar rules. Because of their inability to diagnose and analyze their thoughts, students found such an assignment very difficult to complete.

Writing-to-learn activities, however, gave them stepping stones toward it. These activities took place during two class periods and involved some homework.

1. Because of the organization of our textbook, we had viewed a movie on a town in northern Germany two months before the letter-writing project was assigned. At that time students had listed in their journals characteristics of the architecture, landscape, food, outdoor activities, and such. We reviewed those lists for the letters.
2. I then showed a movie on the Swabian Alps in southern Germany. Students were encouraged to note characteristics of the landscape.
3. After the movie, we listed what we had seen using clustering. (See figures 1 and 2.) This organized the ideas generated from watching the movie. Students did not have to spend time looking up previous chapters' vocabulary; the cluster that we composed as a class served as a vocabulary review.
4. The next assignment was to use clustering for northern Germany. (See figures 3 and 4.) Although most students were able to recall the characteristics of the landscape, some students needed to re-



Figure 1.

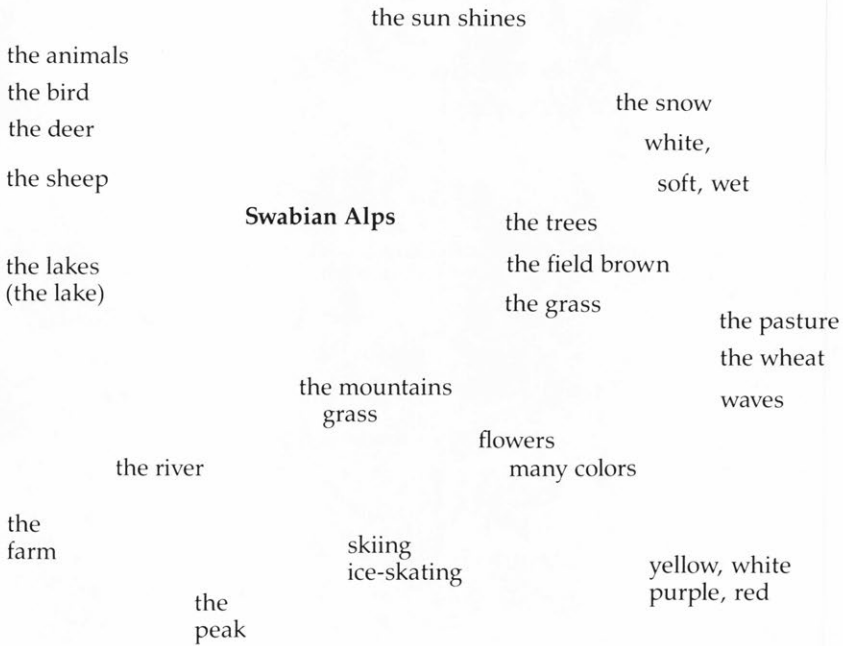


Figure 2.

fer back to their lists from two months earlier. (Since the lists were in the journal, this was no problem.) After we finished this map, students had two loosely organized outlines of the characteristics of northern and southern Germany. These outlines would be crucial for comparing and contrasting northern and southern Germany.

5. The final preparation for the assignment was to review letter format and application of the conversational past tense. Students now had several stepping stones for the assignment: knowledge of the landscapes and outdoor activities; vocabulary; a loose organization of information; a review of the conversational past tense; and a review of the letter format. I then asked students to write the previously described letter, convincing the reader of the beauty of northern Germany. Since many American students know only the beauty of the south of Germany, I hoped the letter would give them a different perspective on northern Germany. The writing-to-learn techniques that I used for this assignment greatly reduced students' anxiety, and letters were organized, clear and grammatically correct.



	das Wetter (weather)		der Wolke (n)—cloud
	die Blumen		
	es regnet viel	flach	der Sonnenaufgang (sunrise)
meadow			
	die Wiese		
Gras (sehr grün)	<b>Nord Deutschland</b>		der See
			der Nordsee
(beach) der Strand		Hoch See Angeln	der Ostsee
		schwimmen	die kuh
	angeln	braun werden	die Milch
straw roof			ist frisch
	das Strohdach (-er)		die Butter
	danisch	Hauser	
	mild, sanft: gentle		die Landschaft

Figure 3.

	the weather		the cloud
	the flowers		
	it rains a lot	flat	the sunrise
the meadow			
		<b>North Germany</b>	the ocean
the beach			the North Sea
		high seas fishing	the Baltic
		swimming	
straw roof	fishing	to get a tan	the cow
	the straw roof(s)		the milk is
	danish	houses	fresh, the
			butter
	mild, soft: gentle		the landscape

Figure 4.

23 Januar

Liebe Elke,

Ich möchte Dir ein bisschen von meiner Reise in Nord Deutschland erzählen. Die Landschaft ist ja herrlich. Die Wiesen sind sehr grün und alles ist sehr flach. Alles ist einfach aber schön. Die verschiedene Farben—grün, braun, orange, und rot im Herbst—sind beruhigend. an den Alpen ist es auch schön und überall sind prächtige Aussichten aber in Nord Deutschland kann man den Sonnenaufgang und Sonnenuntergang Meilen weit umher sehen.

Ich schlage Dir vor, Nord Deutschland zu besuchen. Ich weiß, dass die Alpen herrlich sind, aber Nord Deutschland ist wieder etwas ganz anderes. Auf den Seen kann man segeln und schwimmen; und Hoch See Angeln kann man auch. Am Strande kann man sich sonnen. Ich glaube Nord Deutschland wird Dir gefallen und du wirst eine sehr schöne Zeit hier haben. Bitte, komme hierher und ich werde Dir alles zeigen.

Deine  
Natalie

## Translation

Dear Elke,

I'd like to tell you a little about my trip in northern Germany. The landscape is gorgeous. The pastures are very green and everything is very flat. Everything is simple but beautiful. The different colors—green, brown, orange, and red in the fall—are soothing. In the Alps it is also beautiful, and all over there are magnificent views, but in northern Germany you can see the sunrise and sunset for miles.

I recommend you visit northern Germany. I know that the Alps are gorgeous, but northern Germany is something else. You can sail and swim in the ocean, and you can also go high-sea-angling! On the beach you can lie in the sun. I think you'll like northern Germany and you'll have a very beautiful time here. Please, come and visit me, and I'll show you everything.

Yours,  
Natalie

Natalie used the vocabulary and the organization that the clustering activity provided to successfully point out the beauty of northern Germany as compared to southern Germany. Although she chose not to use the conversational past tense, she did use two-verb construction and the future tense properly. The review of the conversational past tense helped her to remember the rules for constructing those sentences.

One student was absent for the clustering assignments and later came in to get help. We worked on his clusters together. I asked him when he would need to come in again. "I've got everything I need. I can do it on my own," he stated confidently. (This student was unable

to complete even the most elementary assignment the previous year.) Many students felt the same way; anxiety about the assignment was minimal, yet the quality of their work was high. The stepping stones we used to produce the letter enabled students to complete the assignment by organizing their thoughts on paper. The use of writing-to-learn techniques was crucial to their success on this assignment.

### Cultural Activities

Integrating diverse cultural activities into regular classroom activities is a major goal in my German classes. A mere tolerance of a different way of doing things is not enough. I want my students to know enough about the German people to understand why things might be different and eventually to accept these differences.

I used writing-to-learn methods in a brief unit on dancing, because I felt my students would have the "we're-too-cool" syndrome and would automatically close their minds to this aspect of Germans' social interactions. I wanted students to think about the value of the unit and, through various writing assignments, convince themselves to participate. Writing about the proposed dance unit was also a way to get their anxieties out in the open.

To begin, I asked my students to record first thoughts on why it might be important to study the role of dancing in German society. Some were aware of the value of the unit, but responses varied tremendously.

Sally

Why learn a dance from another country?

1. To get a taste of one of their pastimes
2. Because it would be fun (sort of)
3. To learn a custom and the reasons for their dance
4. To feel familiar with a dance so if you visit you can do it comfortably
5. To make a fool of ourselves and hopefully have fun doing it

Ron

Why learn a dance from another country?

To learn different traditions, because it looks and is fun, and there's nothing else to do!

Chris

Why should we learn a dance?

I believe we should learn a German dance simply because we requested that our class be taught as much as possible about German

culture and tradition. Not only did we want to learn their language but we wanted to know about them as people.

After they shared their writing with the class, and it became clear that they were interested in the unit but concerned about their images, I gave a brief explanation of the role of dancing in the German teenager's life. In addition, I talked about my own experiences with dancing as a seventeen-year-old exchange student in Germany. Of course, background information was not enough to convince them of the value of the unit. Students need to understand why they should learn about a behavior before they will be receptive to information. I wanted students to understand why we were doing the unit, but I also wanted them to be comfortable with the activities.

Our next writing project was a **dialogue**. I asked students to describe a conversation between themselves (as reluctant students) and a German youth who really wants to attend dancing school. The German youth served as an "alter ego." My looking silly while dancing also gave them insight into the role of dancing in Germany. Students scribbled furiously; after all, their reputations were at stake. Many students expressed their fears; some expressed slight interest in the unit. Others went one step further: they convinced themselves that the unit was important.

Anthony

*American:* What do you mean you're going to a dance school? Dancing is boring when learning it in school. I can't stand it.

*German:* Dancing is not boring, it's fun, exciting. You should learn something different for a change.

*American:* Why? It's only a waste of time. When could I use such a stupid dance?

*German:* Well, when you're invited to dances or parties.

*American:* I'm never invited to dances or parties.

*German:* Well, you could go to the one at school.

*American:* I have no one to go with and I don't know how to dance.

*German:* Well, that's why you should learn how to.

*American:* I have two left feet.

*German:* With practice you can be good at it. I'm excited about learning a new dance.

Sally

*American:* We're learning dancing in German class and I don't want to.

*German:* You're kidding! I would love to be taking dance classes. It's such an important part of our society, and I don't want to be left out.

*American:* Really? I didn't know it meant so much to you guys, but I don't think I need to learn them.

*German:* You would be surprised! If you ever come over to visit, you might feel pretty uncomfortable sitting down while everyone is dancing. Seriously, dancing could be considered a major pastime!

*American:* Mmmm, well, I guess I better pay attention then and learn the dance.

Fran

*American:* Shoot! I really think dancing lessons are stupid! I don't want to dance.

*German:* What was that? You don't want to dance? But dancing is fun and healthy. You get to know people and to be involved.

*American:* Yeah, but dancing just isn't the thing for me. I don't think I can do it.

*German:* Oh, but you can. If you look at it openmindedly you can really enjoy yourself.

*American:* Well . . . .

*German:* Come on—give it a try—it's a lot of fun!

After sharing dialogues and laughing and joking nervously, students were more sensitive to the importance of the German social situations that call for dancing. At the end of three days of instruction on actual dance steps, types of music typical to a region or age, and dance etiquette, students were asking questions related to the unit and were eager to learn more dances. Not a single student had asked to be excused from the lessons.

The writing assignments gave students a chance to think about and publicize their insecurities about looking like fools. The dialogue with the "alter ego" convinced many students that the unit was important and motivated them to actively participate. The success of the unit could well be attributed to the attitude change that occurred as students wrote. At the end of the unit they could understand this new social situation and explain it to themselves, their parents, and peers. If and when they visit Germany, they will be more comfortable using their newly acquired skills.

We concluded the unit with another dialogue. Students wrote the conversation they would have with the German after finishing the dance unit. This time the students wrote in German.

*American:* Also, wir haben 2 Tage Tan-Unterricht gehabt. Es war wirklich interessant. Es war nicht leicht, aber es war Spass.

*German:* Ja, ich habe gedacht du wirst eine schöne Zeit haben.

*American:* Ja, ich habe gelacht und alles hat Spaß gemacht!

*German:* Siehst du! Tazen ist nicht schlecht. Wo hast du getanzt?

*American:* Oben mit meinen Klassenkameraden.

*German:* Ach, gut! Du kannst mit den deutschen Kindern jetzt tanzen.

*American:* Wir haben den Walzer, die Polka, den Ente Tanz, und den Swing Tanz gelernt.

*German:* Oje! Das hat mir DM75 gekostet.

### Translation

*American:* Well, we've had 2 days of dance lessons. It was really interesting. It wasn't easy, but it was fun!

*German:* Yes, I thought you'd have a good time.

*American:* Yes, I laughed, and everything was fun!

*German:* You see! Dancing isn't bad. Where did you dance?

*American:* Upstairs with my classmates.

*German:* Ahh, good. Now you can dance with the German kids.

*American:* We learned the waltz, the polka, the duck dance, and the wing dance.

*German:* Wow, that cost me 75 Marks.

The dialogues confirmed the dramatic change in student attitudes I had perceived during the dance unit. Step by step, student inhibitions dissolved as dialogue and dance lessons became more frequent throughout the year. A willingness and desire on the part of the students to learn about the culture being studied is clearly crucial to their success in mastering the language.

I attribute much of my success in fostering student interest in the German culture and language to using writing-to-learn techniques. In my large classes, writing-to-learn techniques have been invaluable in keeping all of the students actively engaged in the subject matter. In particular, the journal has provided a mechanism which organizes students' thoughts and work, displays student progress through the year, and gives me a means for evaluating student effort. Writing to learn facilitates a step-by-step increase in student confidence and competence, as students, through their writing, move smoothly from skill-acquiring to skill-applying. Used in such diverse areas as speaking, learning grammar, writing for real-life situations, and understanding cultural concepts, writing-to-learn techniques are an invaluable aid for helping students gain competence in foreign languages.