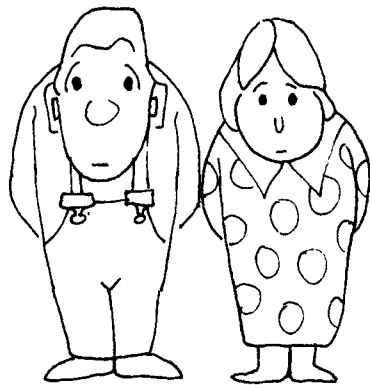


THE RITE-AID SPIRAL THEME NOTEBOOK

John Warriner

A recent advertising flyer, mailed to local post office boxholders, presented twenty-five small display advertisements. Among ads for hair spray, glue, and a sixpack of beer, appeared an ad for "The Rite-Aid Spiral Theme Notebook," 100 sheets, 8X10, for 59 cents. This ad attracted my attention because of its implication that themes are being written in today's schools; at least, the supermarket expected a demand for a theme notebook. As we all realize, while the ad may sell a quantity of "Rite-Aids" to conscientious (or pessimistic) students getting ready for the opening of school in September, it may still be quite wrong in its implied conviction about theme writing. One may wonder, perhaps, about the spelling accuracy expected in themes when in the brand name of the theme notebook, spiral or not, "write" is spelled "rite."



major premises

Teachers of English will surely welcome, in the hands of their students, a sparkling new, as yet uncontaminated, theme notebook. Our question is how effectively will teachers be able to bring it into use?

If, as writers and teachers are constantly reminding us, the only way to learn to write is to write, we must regularly require our students to write. On our way to a discussion of how to do this, we may as well avoid apoplexy by resisting the urge to explain heatedly the reasons always advanced for the low level of writing competence displayed by many of our high school graduates.

Three reasons are usually cited for this incompetence. The first is the large class load given to English teachers. This heavy load, which makes the composition teacher's task unbearably time-consuming, is certainly a major reason why teachers do not assign the requisite number of compositions. The second reason is the audio-visual, but not literacy-producing, experience of TV. To the extent that TV reduces the amount of reading our students do, it must also reduce the quality of their writing. Familiarity with the written language is



minor premise

essential to an understanding of what good writing is. The third reason, long blamed for making writing obsolete in the schools, is the wide use of objective tests.

Those are the universally offered causes of our problem, but constantly deploring them accomplishes nothing. The solution of any one of them must be a long-range effort, but our need is immediate. It is at least doubtful, anyway, whether any important change in the size of pupil load, in the lure of TV, and in the kind of testing that does not require writing will ever be achieved. Given these formidable drawbacks, what can we do to bring about improvement in student writing?

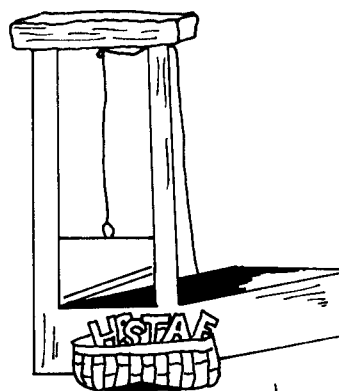
The Components of Good Composition Teaching

Most English teachers have developed their own successful ways of teaching writing, but whatever their tricks of the trade, all good composition teaching must embrace the following:

(1) Establish a school-wide composition program. The first step is administrative, or supervisory. It is the estab-

lishment of a school-wide or system-wide writing program that specifies exactly how often compositions are to be written and what writing skill is to be taught in each assignment. A school-wide requirement--two compositions a month, for example--helps to assure that writing practice will not be forgotten. Teachers will see to it that their students write the required compositions and study the designated skills. On the other side of the desk, students will accept their regular writing assignments with less complaining because they know everyone else is receiving the same assignments. They expect to have to write. The program should help to bring an end to the sudden, unexpected, and therefore resented, assignment. The off-the-top-of-the-head assignment, announced suddenly without any clear purpose, except to test, certainly not to teach writing, and given usually without any real help from the teacher in its preparation, turns students against composition assignments and inevitably produces poor, if any, results. Simply announcing that a composition will be due on Tuesday is not teaching, and probably not even testing, anything.

(2) Teach a writing skill to be learned and demonstrated in each composition assignment. When an assignment is vague, when it is not prepared for, and when it comes as an unexpected nuisance, it probably accomplishes very little. Teachers should devote a class period to preparing the class to write. Part of the period should be spent teaching the particular writing skill to be put into practice. Students must understand what is expected of them. For example, one simple skill taught many times in any composition program is beginning an expository paragraph with a generalization, or topic sentence, and developing, or supporting, the opening generalization with examples. In preparing their class, teachers will read and analyze with them some model expository paragraphs. They may supply a "decapitated" paragraph, one without an opening generalization, and have students supply a suitable topic sentence for it. As a result of this preparation, every student knows the



decapitated paragraph

assignment requires the writing of a paragraph that begins with a topic sentence and is developed by examples. The writing skill has been taught.

(3) Help students to find something to write about. The second part of the preparatory lesson helps the student to find something to write about. The teacher suggests topics. Class discussion produces more topics. Sometimes a paragraph can be created on the chalkboard, the entire class participating. Now with a clear idea of the skill to be demonstrated and with a subject to write about, the student approaches his assignment free of at least two of the frustrations a composition assignment often imposes.

(4) Follow-up the assignment. Even teachers with 125 to 150 students can read one-paragraph compositions productively, provided they have established one skill as a requirement for the paragraph. In their follow-up--their reading, correcting, and evaluating--they are concerned primarily with how well the writers have demonstrated their grasp of the skill taught. If the writers have, all is well. If not, there must be a second chance. A skill is rarely mastered in one practice session. The procedure in the composition lesson is the same whether the skill to be taught is as simple as the one just mentioned or as sophisticated as using concrete narrative detail in telling a story. Teach a skill. Help with subject matter. Follow up.

(cont. on p. 49)

in as marriage and all other institutions break down.

It's in the home, after all, that twigs are bent.

Nor can you expect help from your colleagues--most of whom would rather switch (from one union to another) than fight (for the basics, on which our founding foreparents laid down their lives). According to research, when most inmates of our jails and penitentiaries were still in school, they preferred pot and pinball to the relevant supportive details, developed theses, and cogent conclusions of the standard essay. It is, in short, the same sad story: virtually all teachers, parents, and students having betrayed their sacred trusts in our time, it's the innocent taxpayer who picks up the tab.

As your bleeding-heart colleagues mollycoddle your students and overlook their bad thinking in ungrammatical papers, there is not much that, in any meaningful way, shape, or form, as far as the illogicality of your students is concerned, you, as a conscientious teacher, can do.

My advice:

- (1) Stick to the courage of your convictions.
- (2) Speak boldly to its vs. it's, lie vs. lay, infer vs. imply.
- (3) Pull no punches on the two differents--than and from.
- (4) Abominate cliches.
- (5) When in doubt, eschew.

One day your unthinking students will come to a rude awakening and wish too late that in the days of youth they had cultivated the standard argumentative essay. Their failure to do so will haunt them to their dying day--should they live so long.

Loyally,

Ignatius Foilitch, B.S., Ph.D.

John Warriner (cont. from p. 31)

Teaching the Mechanical Aspects of Writing

What about the mechanical aspects of good writing? Teachers know that they must not be misled in their evaluation of writing by the neat and mechanically perfect paper that says nothing. However, they also know that the examples of incompetence in their students' writing most often cited by their critics are errors in usage, sentence structure, punctuation, spelling, and word choice. All except word choice are mechanical skills that must be taught in any writing program. Ideally, the teacher's role is to examine his students' compositions for mechanical errors, point them out, and have the writer correct them. This, of course, leads us back to class load, and we must admit that this time-honored procedure is in many, probably most, schools unrealistically demanding.

Two things can be done. First, the rules can be taught, preferably by the inductive method, in which, by examining samples of good writing and bad writing, students discover for themselves the rules to be observed. Through classroom exercises in sentence improvement, students may eventually be brought to know the difference between a good sentence and a bad sentence. The carry-over from exercises to their own writing is not certain, but it can be made to happen if the teacher can give enough drill.

All we can do is work hard and systematically and hope that the themes that will ultimately grace the now blank pages of "The Rite-Aid Spiral Theme Notebook" will reflect an encouragingly steady growth in writing competence.

What, by the way, is a spiral theme?

John Warriner received his education at Central Michigan, Michigan, and Harvard Universities. He taught junior-senior high school and administered an English department for 25 years in addition to writing the Warriner textbooks.