

# Contexts For Writing

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I asked a six-year-old if he was a writer yet.

“Yes,” he replied, “you just put down what’s in your head.”

True, but like all other activities, writing is sustained or constrained — by its context. It is illuminating to observe the different settings in which school writing is done, since these figure largely in students’ expectations of themselves and of teachers. Most teachers set the topics, and most writing is graded; by producing the kind of writing their teachers seem to want, students hope to gain a good mark. Over the years they lose the six-year-old’s sense of having things to say of their own. Meanwhile, teachers suppose that students cannot write without suggested topics and the incentive of marks — and indeed, for a time they cannot.

A College of Education student wrote:

*At secondary school it was always writing to please whichever teacher was teaching you. Essays all had to be very descriptive and interesting to the teacher we had, otherwise they were no good.*

The circle of passivity is complete.

And then there are the constraints of time, occasion, and absence of audience other than the teacher. However, the teacher who abandons the role of assessor, to become an advisor, begins to change the picture. And the writing changes too; it begins to take on the character of a conversation, one with reflections or questions. That is to say, the writer’s own intentions begin to operate, and the teacher-audience is now seen as a real listener who may even be expected to reply, in conversation or writing. Such are the expectations of the senior high school boy who wrote this journal entry:

*I think I went fairly well (in a maths exam) after such a disastrous start, and this is probably because I enjoy maths so much this year. You would too if you had Captain Brown for a teacher. With a unique combination of nautical terminology and mathematical theory delivered at great volume through the smoke haze of the occasional Marlborough, one cannot help but pay attention.*

What has happened here is the crucial change in the role of the teacher. By becoming a partner in — rather than a director of — the student’s writing, he has cleared the way for the student’s own intentions. At first the student may not in fact know his own intentions; but the way is now clear for the teacher to help the student to discover them. Consider this log entry from a fifteen-year-old girl:

*Would you give me some English please. Would you give me an interesting book to read, for example a humorous*

*one. I have finished all my Geography off. We have done a great amount of work in Geography since September. Can you also give me some work on my project because I am getting bored with just taking notes and putting my own views down on paper. I would like to do something different with this project. Today I started to answer those questions you set me on primitives but I am stuck so I will carry on with them on Monday with your help.*

On the way to becoming an autonomous learner, this student has yet to find a language, her own language; and she is on the edge of escape from the all-pervading school sense that you must use other people’s language — the language you may never manage. As a less fortunate student put it:

*I knew what he was on about, but I only knew what he was on about in my words. I didn’t know his words. In my exams I had to change the way I learnt you know. In all my exercise books, I put it down the way I understood, but I had to remember what I’d written there and then translate it into what I think they will understand, you know.*

Written conversation would seem to be the language bridge; and the form of writing nearest to speech is the journal. It has no set form and does not, therefore hold the anxieties for students that other forms of writing carry — no problems of topic sentences or beginnings and conclusions. In addition, a journal has built-in rights and needs of reflection, comment, and questions. It can move from trivia to a student’s deepest reflection and back; and it has the continuity which provides for sheer quantity, which is also an important element in writing progress. A seventeen-year-old student commented as follows on the effect of her journal writing:

*I found that with writing regularly, my ability to write improved enormously, not only in the quality of the result but in the ease of actually doing the writing . . . I often used my writing as a thought formulating process . . .*

Given the writing that journals require and the confidence that they may foster, students will begin to move into other literary forms, whether in their journals or as additions to them. If it is made clear to them that all forms are welcome, some will write poems, or more formal descriptions of events, or narratives, or, by negotiation, essays which take up themes they have explored in their journals or their reading. They move into these transitions naturally if their teachers show them the possibilities. Of course the amount and quality from different students varies; but the students’ access to autonomy in learning and to a language to match — that is the essential feature behind this kind of work. It turns upon a non-authoritarian relationship with their

(continued on p. 58)

The rain of such names was unrelenting. Before the end of the second day of the Conference, a competition for conferees had suggested itself; and the following notice was posted in the Stockwell Lounge:

Response was gratifying: Entries trickled in by ones; and in the chaos of ad-hoc planning, execution failed only somewhat.<sup>2</sup> It was in the farewell session of Workshop II, at 1:00 on Tuesday, June 30, that selected entries of the extant (in-State) ones were read aloud,<sup>3</sup> and the winning contributors identified. The criterion for judgment of entries was clarified as follows: How long had the Judge of the entries known each contributor of them?

### A Selection of Entries

**aphthoniosis, n.** logorrhea occasioned by elephantiasis of the rhetorical cortex, commonly followed by atrophy of that organ.

Barry Pegg  
Michigan Technological University  
Houghton, Michigan

**clunking, n.** the skilled editor's deletion of inner vocal information so as to facilitate an easy, public cognitive style. v., to delete inner vocal information so as to facilitate an easy, cognitive style.

Donald Morse  
Oakland University  
Rochester, Michigan

**ECB'er, n.** a member of the elitist citizen's band, usually a rhetor-neck who raps in conferences with fellow ECB'ers; one who informs another of hazardous transitions, inclement conclusions, or otherwise smokey discourse hiding behind blackboards on freeways, with the aim of gaining the write-of-way.

Litsa Marlos Varonis  
ECB

**Lingua d'Frank, n.** the imitative discourse of devotees of the silver-haired guru from Arizona State University.

Barbara Couture  
Wayne State University

**logger rhythm, n.** the pace at which two persons, looking for trees in the ECB forest, might operate a bucksaw.

Steve J. Van Der Weele  
Calvin College  
Grand Rapids, Michigan

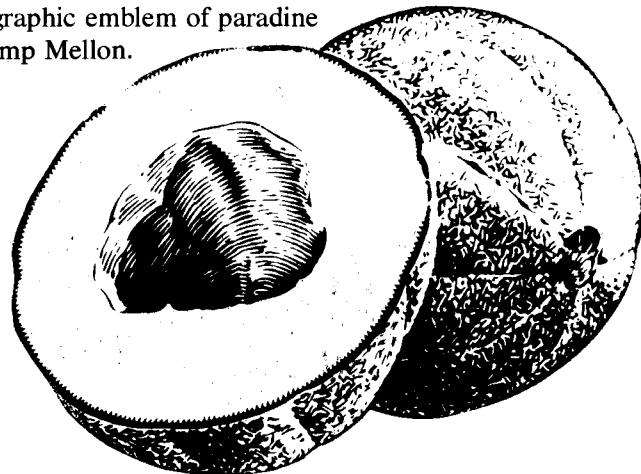
<sup>2</sup>That is to say, Stockwell Staff cleaned up the "mess" after the almost all-night dance in the Lounge. With the mess went most of the entries submitted by Workshop I participants — an ill wind for all but the in-state contributors of Workshop II.

<sup>3</sup>Bowlerized, it's true. Not all entries — verbatim — were in fact fit, then to be read aloud or here to appear in print. *Literacy in the 1980's* was an intense learning experience; and one *did* have to be there.

**mastoidbation, n.** euphoria resulting from listening to the voice in your ear. syn. auto auditoria.

Daniel Fader  
Barbra Morris  
ECB

**paradine, n.** sumptuous dining. e.g. 'The six days of dining in Stockwell Hall were an exercise in paradine.' cf. The universal graphic emblem of paradine is a plump Mellon.



**paradine lost, n.** The days in Ann Arbor together being over — the time to go home.

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Hope College  
Holland, Michigan

The *fforum*-winning first-prize entry was conceived by Mary Ann Walters of Calvin College and defined by her colleague George Graham Harper:

**ongst, n.** the acute anxiety occasioned by one's inability to find an excuse, in conversation with one's peers, for invoking the name or even the titles of the works of Walter J. Ong, S.J.

**Martin** (continued from page 15)

teachers. It is a matter of bringing personal involvement back into the education scene and thereby raising the level of achievement. To see journal writing and its attendant directions as just another kind of topic set by the teachers and marked in the usual way would be to mistake the situation totally. It is in effect a different curriculum which carries with it different forms of writing.

Of course journals are not the only form of writing that students should do; nor is it invariably bad for teachers to set a topic for the whole class to do. But it is suggested that unassessed journals — written for the teacher and chiefly about the work in which the students are engaged — should form a major element in their writing. Where journals have been used in this way they have yielded rewards for students and teachers alike. The effect is to alter significantly the all-too-common authoritarian contexts for students' writing. Improved contexts — of reflection and conversation — significantly affect the students' freedom, as they learn on higher and higher levels, "to put down what's in their heads."