



WLA Newsletter

. . .writing as a liberating activity. . .

ISSUE TEN

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FINDLAY COLLEGE

USAGE AND ABUSAGE: TEACHING

GRAMMAR WITHOUT TEXTBOOKS (PART II)

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What are the benefits of using student writing and small groups to teach grammar? First, they give students the opinions of their peers. Often our students think that their teachers are being "picky" and deliberately obtuse when we tell them that something is wrong with a sentence or paragraph or essay. There is nothing like peer pressure to convince the author that something must be done to a sentence, paragraph, or essay because real readers, other students, are confused. For example, a student wrote:

Esther Rall (Florida) playing the part of the mother to Jo Jo, Thelma, and Michael, and the wife to James, is a very understandable mother and wife, she's a housewife willing and ready to do anything she can to satisfy her husband and her children; She's always teaching her children that a wrong never makes a right and a right way is always equal to a right, by doing this they will not go astray in the wrong direction but the right way.

The members of the class were quite vocal about their difficulties in following the idea as it is written; they insisted that the student revise it into several sentences.

After the class worked on this, they found that the ending was repetitive and decided that it should be chopped off because the student had said the same thing twice.

This brings me to a second benefit of using student writing. Even though the use of tear sheets may lead you to think that grammar is still being taught in a vacuum, in actual practice it doesn't work out that way. Because I do all of my teaching throughout the semester from my students' papers, my classes get to know that writing is to be

PART I: A RECAP

In Part I of "Usage and Abusage" (WLA, Issue Nine, Spring 1977), Marie Jean Lederman explains how she avoids grammar texts with their "canned" examples and instead uses "material written by students in that particular class to teach grammar." After students have written an assignment, Lederman makes up a "tear sheet" of problems appearing on the papers. She tries to pull a sentence from each student's paper and to get on the sheet examples of each kind of error that appears in the set of papers. Class work--including some work in small groups--centers on these tear sheets.

WLA ISSUE TEN: GRAMMAR AND WRITING

Issue Ten continues the focus on the role of grammar in writing classes that began in Issue Eight. Besides the conclusion of "Usage and Abusage," this issue contains responses to the first part of Lederman's article, an excerpt from an incisive 1974 "position statement" of the NCTE Commission on Composition, and a back-to-the-basics argument for the "fundamentals" of usage and mechanics. There also is "Where Do We Go From Here"--a contest sponsored by Findlay College's Fund to Promote Innovative English Teaching.

tinkered with. They begin to understand that there are some corrections which "must" be made and others that could be made -- if the author happens to agree. We are concerned here with grammar as an integral part of writing. What I am trying to get students to see is that revision is necessary for many reasons. One reason may be that, in Standard Written English, the sentence is simply not grammatically correct; another reason may be that, stylistically, the sentence or paragraph or essay would be more effective and stronger if some changes were made.

Students always offer suggestions for revision, and when they do this they are discussing writing. Unlike sentences or paragraphs out of grammar texts, the examples we use were written by themselves or other members of the class. They have a genuine desire to be helpful to each other. For example, in her first essay one student wrote: "In the year 1955 a baby girl name _____ was born, her birth place was in Bronx, New York at St. Francis hospital, she was the only darky in that ward at that time, so therefore there was no mix up." The class appreciated the irony in that sentence, chuckled, and then proceeded to correct the errors in the sentence. Another example of student feedback is the class response to a paragraph which was written by another student: "Bernadette Sanis (Thelma) is the daughter of James and Florida, her attendance in school seems to be half way perfect." Of course the class noted that this was not a paragraph but a sentence with incorrect punctuation. However, they responded with appropriate laughter to the phrase "half way perfect."

This procedure teaches, directly, how to proofread and revise one's own writing. We do, together, what each student needs to do at home when he or she has finished a first draft of a paper. I try to teach students that in the initial, creative first draft they should not think about spelling, punctuation or anything beyond getting out and on paper what is floating around inside their heads. However, revisions of this first draft must be made. After an initial cooling-off period, the student must go back to the paper and look at its structure and details as critically as we do in class.

Discussions of vocabulary, levels and appropriateness of language, "hip" versus Standard English -- all grow out of the use of their writing. These discussions do not come in any preordained sequence. I don't make assumptions about what students must know before they start writing. I believe that students learn to write by writing, and writing again. Students learn to write when they have an audience that they want to reach and something that they want to say. They learn to improve their writing when they discover the reasons for their failure in communicating clearly and effectively.

Our class time is limited. I have no time to concentrate in these classes on anyone's writing but my students'. This is not to say that we don't use literature, films, and television assignments as springboards for ideas and, sometimes, to discuss ways of organizing and structuring these ideas. However, the bulk of our time is spent discussing the students' writing.

Does this procedure make for additional work for the teacher? It depends. If you are a good typist, it can take as little as five or ten minutes after you have finished reading and indicating corrections on a set of papers. Then it takes whatever time it takes in your school to have the material duplicated. However, it works best if you throw everything away at the end of the semester and start again with each new class. Even if students can be counted on to keep making the same errors, I don't use material from one semester's students with the next. Like the examples from grammar texts, the material has become "canned." Doesn't this mean more work? Yes, but I believe there is compensation in the level of student interest and, ultimately, it makes learning -- and teaching -- easier.

In addition, duplicating examples from the class can save individual conference time. If you have already discussed three of a student's run-on sentences in class, you don't have to go over them again in conference, unless you believe that the student is still having trouble. If you break the class up into small groups with different sheets, you can work with one group on a particular problem instead of doing it separately with each student. /Continued on p. 4./

Response to "Usage and Abusage"

Carol H. Adams
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Like Ms. Lederman, I too believe in teaching grammar. Also, I once thought that students could most effectively write and learn grammar amid their writing. Presently, however, I have concluded that the average or above-average students will learn by almost any method, but the weaker student must learn the principles of grammar before he writes. As a mason learns to construct a foundation, the weaker student must learn where and how the brick belong in his sentence construction.

As an instructor, I can hold a student responsible fairly only for the grammar that I have taught. Following a pre-test, I must begin at the simplest point. In punctuation, for example, I begin by having a student identify punctuation marks. It sounds like a simple assignment, but many freshmen cannot name a "colon" or "semi-colon." For those who find the activity simple, it can be a good motivating factor.

Next, I have the student begin work individually on a particular punctuation unit that is structured from the simple to the more difficult. Following a pre-test, the student reads the objectives for each unit and begins work accordingly. I attempt to get him to do any work in his textbook before the class period if possible.

During the class period, I initially get each student started on his grammar. I offer him learning alternatives to break up any textbook monotony. These choices can include one-on-one drill, small group work, filmstrips, cassettes and workbooks, worksheets, self-paced machines, tests, and even blackboard work. My goal is to help and guide the student in his learning, vary and reinforce his study, and use his classtime for peaks of learning.

When a student finishes a unit, I give him a post-test. If his evaluation is proficient, I channel him into another grammar unit. If not, we evaluate his work and begin again. When the student concludes his work in grammar at a proficient level, he can begin his paragraph writing.

In this paragraph writing, the student may make some grammatical errors, but probably I will not receive a paper that is full of mechanical errors and he will not be subjected to peer criticism. Usually this student will not have many cracks in his mortar. His foundation will be strong. As he begins to write, the student should then be ready for Ms. Lederman's methods.

 Response to Marie Jean Lederman

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 Rogers High School
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One of my teaching assumptions handles writing as an effort on the part of an originating mind to touch other minds. Since spoken language is more often used by all of us, I insist early that any writing be read aloud by its author. Even if read to himself at first, much usage and grammar difficulty can be avoided. The writer's audience should be extended to family or friends if possible, before classmates read it--by this point, before "it" can be handled silently if the classroom situation seems to call for that variation. My bias, then, turns the attention of the student away from writing as some kind of a process, to it as a transfer of ideas to other minds. Grammar, I agree, should be taught by the teacher "without textbooks," with sentences taken from the current compositions being submitted. I have no objection to a voluntary use of handbooks as a supplement to my grammar exposition, since basically some of the same task is assumed by the instructor.

Yes, teach grammar along with composition. Yes, use current student examples to avoid "canned" sentences. Maybe at the high school level however, grammar might well be taught as a separable activity in deference to its aura of insolubility in the teenage mind, as well as integrating with other writing aspects as Ms. Lederman has suggested.

Usage and Abusage, ctd.

One of the objections of my colleagues to this business of not using grammar texts is that it makes the student too dependent on the teacher, not to have a grammar book in which to look up rules after he or she leaves your class. I suppose that I'm jaded, but I don't believe that students look up rules in grammar texts when they write for other classes. However, to meet this objection there is nothing wrong in asking your students to buy a grammar text, as long as it's cheap and it is a text that students have some remote chance of understanding when they're alone at home.

However, I have seen real abuses of grammar texts when I visit composition classes. Some teachers who believe that students can't write until they have "learned" grammar, and this is especially true in our remedial and corrective classes, may spend much or all of the term working with the students in class from the text or workbook; their assignments at home are from the text or workbook. This is not only "canned writing" but "canned teaching." It becomes easy to fall into this workbook-assignment-workbook correction habit. Time goes by in class with relatively little planning or thinking on the part of the teacher. Students come in and go through the motions. Very little writing gets done, and what writing does get done gets talked about even less -- and then, generally, from the standpoint of "correctness."

Another abuse in working with grammar texts is the tendency to assume that, because the text is organized in a particular way, the material should be taught in that order. Often the order is the word, sentence, paragraph, essay. This assumes a sequence of learning that is untenable with college students. This may be the order in which language is acquired, but it is a dangerous sequence to accept in dealing with often-bored adult learners. Once the teacher has assigned a text, there is always the danger of marrying it and staying married to it, at least until the term is over. It is this kind of overuse of grammar texts that I object to: a usage that all-too-easily becomes "abusage."

What goes on in our writing classes should have an element of unpredictability about it, should be spontaneous, because that's what good writing is. I think that many of us dislike composition classes because of their "sameness." I believe that this "sameness" is created--by us. It is created because we use the same texts semester after semester with our students--the same texts and the same assignments. Then we complain because composition is maddening. We owe something to our own sanity because, aside from everything else, sanity is an absolute condition for effective teaching. If writing, revising, playing with sentences and paragraphs and essays doesn't excite you as a teacher, then you are going to have trouble teaching students that this is the nature of writing.

USAGE AND GRAMMAR IN THE WRITING CLASS *

Usage. Usage is an aspect of rhetoric; learning to predict the social effects of different dialects or different linguistic constructions is part of learning how writing can achieve its purposes. Students should be provided with information that will allow them the largest possible body of alternatives from which to choose and will help them to choose wisely. They should know, for example, that dragged and drug are both used as past tense forms, but that some listeners will react to drug by considering it uneducated. . . . Such information should be provided through positive instruction about how dialects develop and why variations occur--not through correction based on notions of right and wrong.

Grammar. The study of the structure and history of language, including English grammar, is a valuable asset to a liberal education and an important part of an English program. It should, however, be taught for its own sake, not as a substitute for composition and not with the pretense that it is taught only to improve writing.

Learning by Writing. Learning to write requires writing; writing practice should be a major emphasis of the course. Workbook exercises, drill on usage, and analysis of existing prose are not adequate substitutes for writing.

*These are three of the 18 sections of a 1974 "Position Statement" issued by the NCTE's Commission on Composition. The statement was publicized in NCTE journals, for instance in the October 1974 College English, pp. 219-220.

THE ROLE OF CHAOS

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Traditionally, the chief villain of high school English classes has been chaotic and underdeveloped writing. After all our lectures on unity, development, and coherence, the least we expect of students is that they produce essays that hold together, proceed in a logical order, and elicit some kind of unified response from the reader. We assume that after such fundamentals have been achieved, then we'll work on the finer elements of style, such as originality, flair, interest, and intensity of feeling. Yet, isn't imposing such structural demands too soon in the writing process what inevitably prevents the writing from ever becoming authentic and alive? Too often, it seems, we instill students with such a fear of producing "chaos" that their papers have become well-structured piles of fat and bone that will never contain much meat.

A Learning Experience

After student-teaching for six weeks in a high school advanced composition class, I became so bored with student papers that I began to look seriously for what was causing the problem. I thought (and my cooperating teacher agreed) I had begun where I should, with the broad categories: the writing process, unity, methods of development. And increasingly, students did pay more attention to the writing process, write papers that dealt with one unified idea, and argue their cases logically. Yet, also increasingly, their papers became more lifeless, more mechanical--in short, perfectly boring.

One Wednesday, having spent hours writing comments on ninety of these essays, I announced my disappointment. I suggested to the class that the lifelessness of their papers was wasting their time as well as my own. The next paper, I told them, would have one and only one criterion for grading: "intensity." I explained that by intensity I meant a personal involvement with the subject (which was to be the student's choice, as always); that I wanted to see evidence of real interest in the writing. Nothing else would be important, I told them. Papers would not be evaluated for unity, development, diction, or any other standard criteria. Only intensity. Only the vitality and sincerity that came through.

There was danger in an assignment like this, of course. Students could legitimately pile garbage on top of garbage as long as some forceful words came through. I had said--and I meant it--that nothing but intensity would be important in this paper. And I could have ended up with ninety cases of mental diarrhea recorded in three-page essays. I didn't really care. I was prepared to accept anything that had a spark of the personal interest and sincerity that had been so lacking in most of the previous well-structured papers.

Ironically, what the students turned in for this unusual assignment was not only sincere and moving writing, but papers that scored well on all the other typical criteria too. The papers were forceful and interesting, as I had demanded. But it seemed that, having selected topics of keen personal interest, the students automatically achieved good organization, coherence and logical development. Moreover, diction seemed freer and more natural than in previous papers when students had attempted to be aware of their vocabulary choices.

For instance, one boy wrote a pointed essay on the foolishness of some of the less publicized women's lib battles. A writer of reserved and lifeless opinions in the past, he now made witty and open criticisms of such attempts as outlawing father-son banquets and changing the word amen to aperson. Another student, who had very successfully blended into the woodwork at the back of the room for six weeks, wrote movingly about prejudice. White himself, it seems he had been very much affected by the refusal of a gas station attendant in the deep South to serve a black customer. (An interesting sidelight is that this boy from that point on pulled his desk a little closer to the class, began

* This essay was written while Ms. Mathern was an undergraduate enrolled in Findlay College's course in The Teaching of Writing.

to talk to students near him, and wrote more and more interesting papers as the semester wore on.)

One must be careful about crediting a successful assignment to one factor. Students' mood, teacher's attitude, climate (inside and out), and countless other factors undoubtedly play a part in the success of any teaching technique. But I think at least some--and possibly a great deal--of the credit for these outstanding papers lay in two aspects of the assignment: the insistence that students choose a topic of vital personal interest, and the freedom from having to "structure" their writing too soon.

"In the Beginning . . ."

Too often we ask students to structure what isn't there to begin with. Even God, after all, had to have some "chaos" out of which to create the world. In the beginning, then, perhaps assignments should be aimed at freeing students up to produce plenty of chaos--mass produce words and ideas from which to choose elements of a paper. Something like Peter Elbow's "free writing" technique might prove useful at the outset of each assignment. In Writing Without Teachers (Oxford, 1973), Elbow advises writers simply to sit down and write, non-stop, on the chosen topic for several minutes. While scribbling this way, writers should not be concerned if they stray from the topic or worried about what form the writing is taking. Form comes into play much later in the game. In the beginning, at least, raw creativity from the unconscious (or from wherever you believe it to come) must be captured live on paper--and in as great an abundance as possible.

Not Just Fun and Games

Now before you attack me (as one one of my colleagues did when he heard me describe Elbow's method in the faculty lounge), let me tell you what Peter Elbow goes on to say in Writing Without Teachers. Once the writer has exhausted his source of creativity on a particular matter--has produced three or four or five really rough drafts on the subject--rigorous structuring and organizing and critical thinking are essential. Elbow isn't just urging some kind of stream-or-consciousness game. Once your students have rather quickly recorded what they feel (and think, believe, recall, imagine, understand, know, etc.), they need to structure their writing so that they communicate their messages to an audience. Otherwise, why write?

So, once students have a pile of somewhat usable ideas (as well as a great many words that will never appear in their papers but will have served to help the writers loosen up mentally and discover what they want to write), they examine them looking for essay ideas. They still have a lot of work to do at this point. But at least they have some concretes--lots of actual words--to work with. That means less frustration staring at blank pages. And during the rapid, no-thought free writing, they may have stumbled across some supporting ideas or even side-tracks that will not only bolster their issues but may become the main thrusts of their papers. A great deal can be discovered about a subject through such free writing. And the bonus is that the material that evolves is usually infinitely more original, more flavorful than that produced via the think-it/outline-it/write-it method.

KEY EDITORIAL CONCERNS OF WLA NEWSLETTER

- *The fundamental compatibility of craft and creativity in good writing and in effective writing instruction.
- *The role of writing classes in freeing student imagination and creativity.
- *Ways that teachers can expand the range of instructional options open to them.

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WLA SUBSCRIPTION

If you would like to be added to WLA's mailing list for the next few mailings, send \$2.00 to Richard Gebhardt, Findlay College, Findlay, OH 45840. Make checks payable to Findlay College.

ARTICLES WELCOME

WLA welcomes brief articles that relate to the Key Editorial Concerns and grow out of practical experiences in writing classes. More-or-less regular WLA Departments:

- Teaching Tips--2-3 page outlines of a unit or an approach to a specific teaching task.
- Interconnections--Examinations of approaches or materials of one level of writing class (e.g., college, high school, middle grade) from the perspective of a different level.
- Reading Lists--Recommendations, preferably annotated, of useful or stimulating reading.
- Student Perspectives on the writing teaching enterprise, its methods, its materials.

FUNDAMENTALS FIRST*

Jerry J. West
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"If we can convince our students that spelling, punctuation, and usage are less important than content, we have removed a major obstacle in their developing ability to write."

"Students Right To Their Own Language," College English,
Vol. 36, No. 6, Feb., '75, p. 716.

Those of us who perceive the pedagogic asininity of the statement above must begin to speak plainly, because we must deal with people who make Mark Twain's comic remark their instructional creed: "All you need in life is ignorance and confidence, and then success is sure."

Even the general public knows by now that, in this last generation, many young adults are still writing at the grade school level when they graduate from college. One of my second term students wrote, "Steven Crain dont write so good as Thorough which I had last quater. He dont have the same affect philosopy-wise, his writting is to simple."

Amazed by a failing grade for eighty errors in spelling, punctuation, usage, and grammar in two pages, the student argued that he received "A's" in high school English and a "B+" from his instructor the previous term. These other teachers liked his "ideas." I told him that his thesis was acceptable, but his writing was so bad mechanically that many people would never take his ideas seriously, including prospective employers who might judge him poorly educated on the basis of misspellings alone.

Don't these instructors know that in writing, as in any skill [sic] one must first master the fundamentals, that Franklin and Twain had to labor in print shops before they could be original, that creativity can't be taught anyway, but competence can be?

I believe these non-teachers are of three types:

First, there is the Lazy Lout. He went into the field because most college English courses are easy, and he could buy term papers. He hates poetry and knows less grammar than some of his students. A young colleague revealed himself to me recently by saying, seriously, "Between you and I, teaching grammar is a lot of crap."

The Common Coward is secretly terrified of students, though often fierce in faculty politics where he feels safe. He does anything to mollify his students. He fears physical attack, sharp words, complaints to the department head. He never criticizes his students, never gives exams, never does anything which might offend, and rarely gives a grade below "B."

Lustful Lovers are more complex. Some are even intelligent and competent, but all feel unloved. (English teachers tend to be a homely lot.) They seek to exchange compliments, easy assignments, and good grades for love. Now and then they get ambitious and hope to go to bed with their student buddies, which makes it all the more important that everyone be kept happy.

Those of us who try to teach students how to write well work twice as hard for the say [sic] pay. Grading and marking themes and tests, actually teaching grammar and mechanics in the classroom, doing remedial work with many students, using the grade as a motivational device, and even flunking students if necessary, we often feel lonely. We are sustained by our veneration for the magnificent English language and the occasional student who shares our sense of humility. We may be the butt of the academic world, but we are not the pimple on that extrusion.

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WHERE DO WE GO FROM HERE?

WIN Fame and Fortune (?) In this CONTEST For Writing Teachers

If you were to receive the following paper from a student--

- How would you analyze the student's writing needs?
- How would you convey your diagnosis to the student?
- What would you ask the student to do?
- What instructional strategy would you work out?
- In short, having received the following paper, where would you go from there?

"On the third week of november after a rip roaring season, I was reading the newspaper. I was trying to see if the league pick the samf players I did for the All Star team. So I was reading the paper and found some of my picks where there and some weren't. There were some that surprize me. Like when I read that I make the honest menable team. I couldn't believe it. I John Johnson at 5'6" making honest menable at linebacker. A couple of my pal which made the all-Staf congratulate me for makint it. My whole family were going crazy about it. So crazy I couldn't hear over the phone. My brother were yelling, my sister were jumping for joy over this feat. After a hour of yelling and phone call a congratulation. After the house settle down. In the silence on the living where it started. I sit down and reconize all the hard work I went through which finally paid off this year. I always though though pre season and the regular season if I worked hard enough for this game of body war. I wish I did work hard enough to win a spot on the honest mention team of the league. A great feat for me. I was very delight in winning the onher."

* * *

To stimulate thought about how writing can be taught humanely to students who could be cited as appalling case studies by supporters of back-to-the-basics, Findlay College's Fund to Promote Innovative English Teaching is offering a prize for the most constructive instructional response to this essay. The winning response and runners-up will be printed in a future issue of WLA Newsletter, and the winning writer will recieve a cash award. (As a special service to entrants, the prize will be kept small enough that it will not throw the winner into a higher tax bracket.)

To enter, describe what you would do to help the writer of the above paper improve the essay and/or improve his writing skills generally. Be specific and brief--under 900 words. Try to provide helpful suggestions that other teachers might be able to try. Deadline for entries: 15 February 1978.

WLA Newsletter
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