



WLA Newsletter

. . .writing as a liberating activity. . .

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FINDLAY COLLEGE

WRITING THESIS STATEMENTS THAT EMBODY ASSERTIONS OF UNEQUAL IMPORTANCE

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Inexperienced writers often resort to several discrete sentences or a chain of "ands" in order to juxtapose unequally important ideas (Smoking is disgusting to those who don't smoke, and dangerous to those who do, and should be prohibited and punished).

To counteract these tendencies, I developed the following approach, using Robert Coles' essay, "A Domain (of Sorts)" (in Forrest Burt and E. Cleve Want, Invention and Design, Random House, 1978). Drawing on interviews and his observations of Appalachian families and individuals, Coles illuminates a wide range of attitudes and situations of the mountaineers. The Coles' excerpt advances two sufficiently central ideas to warrant the inclusion of both in the thesis.

An Approach for Helping Students Write Theses With Assertions of Unequal Importance

1. Establish ground rules for writing thesis statements:
 - A. A thesis statement should be one simple or complex but not compound sentence.
 - B. A thesis should answer: What is the point the author is trying to put across?
2. Ask for a statement that expresses one generalization.
Coles: Appalachian people love their land. (A positive statement)
3. Ask for another major value or generalization (some form of qualifier: a condition, concession, causality, inversion, etc.)
Coles: Appalachian people suffer harsh injustices.
4. Write both sentences side by side on the board.
5. In order to choose the dominant idea, students return to the text. By following Coles' insights and organization of individual remarks, the group determines that the tone of the piece becomes increasingly embittered, angry. The students conclude that the dominant impression Coles wants to leave with the reader is negative.
6. Review:
 - A. Which thesis statement reflects this impression?
 - B. Where should it go in the thesis? (Like the Coles piece itself, for impact, this statement belongs in the end "slot" of the thesis.)
 - C. The other statement therefore comes first. (Verify the order on the board.)

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 BRAIN THEORY: SUPPORT FOR WHAT WE DO

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What is the subject matter of a writing teacher's discipline? Of course, the answer is the written word in all of its forms. In a broader context, however, "everything in writing is the product of the verbal imagination; that is, of the mind when it is seriously concerned with form and effect as well as content."¹ The key word here is mind. A clear understanding of how the mind operates may be the necessary variable for helping us develop a common theory that will infuse our practices of teaching writing.

"Writing," as Janet Emig notes, "involves the fullest possible functioning of the brain, which entails the active participation in the process of both the left and right hemispheres."² It is a process which is markedly bispherical.

...the left hemisphere seems to process material linearly. The right hemisphere...seems to make at least three, perhaps four, major contributions to the writing process...the right hemisphere is the sphere, even the seat, of emotions...our sense of emotional appropriateness in discourse may reside in the right sphere...the right hemisphere seems to be the source of intuition, of sudden gestalts, of flashes or images, of abstractions occurring as visual or spatial wholes, as the initiating metaphors in the creative process.³

At least one coherent general brain-based theory of human learning has evolved. This is the Proster Theory, and according to this theory, the human brain is intensely aggressive and highly individual. It seeks out and will accept only what it needs to make sense of the reality it perceives. The brain is not simply the stimulus-response device it sometimes is thought to be; rather, it is elaborately gated, admitting only those inputs it decides to admit and processing what it does admit in its own individual way.⁴

Bonniejean Christensen in A New Rhetoric offers a view which parallels what has been said above:

We have come to see that the receptive nervous system is not a simple one-way communication system carrying messages to the brain to be processed there into our representation of the world. Rather, it is selective....The mind has a program of its own; it sends out to the sense organs and the relay stations orders that specify priorities for different kinds of messages.⁵

Although the brain is constantly assailed by data, it refuses to function under pressure or threat. It works by programs, building those programs by executing them correctly so that intended results are achieved.

The term "program" simply means "an established sequence." For example, a washing machine has a built in program to admit water, rinse, bring in fresh water, agitate, and spin dry. Humans too operate by programs.

At birth a baby has only a few programs, but by school age they number many thousands. By adulthood the number has ordinarily climbed into the hundreds of thousands, or even millions. To utter "hot" requires one program; "hat" requires another. To read "hot" and "hat" calls for two more, to write these words in script, two more, and to print them, again two more.⁶

The Proster Theory defines learning as the acquisition of useful programs. However, students do not acquire programs by being talked at or by being fed

a diet of predigested pap--the content of so many workbooks, texts and enrichment aids. Students learn by programming suitable materials we offer them and by reacting to challenging assignments generated by us.

The Proster Theory suggests that the process of learning can be defined as "the extraction of meaningful patterns from confusion."⁷ The brain is constantly being assailed by data, and it is constantly processing the data for present and future use. The brain is an effective pattern-detecting apparatus, and the best way to foster the detecting of patterns is to provide diverse and challenging input.

Admittedly, no teacher can ever teach the fantastic number of programs that students must learn as they develop skills in composition, but teachers can provide an appetizing diet, a tempting smorgasborg, for the brain to select from, digest and program. Composition teachers can do this by offering varied and meaningful writing assignments.

The most widely used writing assignments have been reporting, describing and narrating. Teachers have students writing in these modes because these kinds of writing are more direct and more honest. Also, there is in these kinds of discourse less chance that students will produce sententious prose than there is if they wrote on more abstract levels. This is not to say that teachers do not want to have their students performing on the more difficult levels; rather, it is a precaution, for teachers are afraid that work at more abstract levels might result in low level generalities and a style characterized as "Engfish."⁸ However, if we limit a student to only the safe assignment, we will not be creating enough mental challenge for the student's aggressive brain.

Granted, some students should be offered assignments in narration and description, but other students must be encouraged to write at levels beyond their ability if we are to promote growth. Presenting students with a variety of writing experiences, from the self expressive and the imaginative, offering something for the poet side of the brain, to disciplined exposition and argumentation, something for the scientist side of the brain, might be our more important role in trying to teach writing.

Students cannot be passive in learning the craft of writing. They must be doers, "writing and writing and rewriting--discovering what they have to say, discovering what they need to know to say it effectively."⁹ We teachers can lay out the smorgasbord, but the students must do the choosing. Nevertheless, if we recognize the individual aggressiveness of each person's brain, we will know that if we are to help students learn to write we will have to teach individuals, at times encouraging discipline and at other times encouraging creativity, trying to keep the two in "productive conflict."⁹ Our knowledge of the research done on the bi-modal nature of the human brain will make us more confident in guiding some students in the craft of formal persuasive discourse while we allow others to exercise their imaginative right lobe.

NOTES

¹John C. Gerber, "Suggestions for a Commonsense Reform of the English Curriculum," College Composition and Communication, 28 (December, 1977), 313.

²Janet Emig, "Writing as a Mode of Learning," College Composition and Communication, 28 (May, 1977), 125.

³Ibid., 125.

⁴Leslie A. Hart, "The New 'Brain' Concept of Learning," Phi Delta Kappan, 59 (February, 1978), 393.

JOURNAL WRITING IN THE GEOGRAPHY PROGRAM

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I started to use journal writing in Geography instruction several years ago, initially in a course in Recreation Geography. My original purpose in asking students to keep journals was to stimulate their powers of observation. research tools of recreation geography is observation. Many serious research projects begin with observations of what outdoor recreational activities are taking place in a given area and questioning the motivations behind these activities.

Most students entering this course see recreational activities but do not observe the activity. By requiring students to keep journals of all recreational activities they observe and participate in, I help students to begin to acquire the techniques of scientific observation.

In my instructions to the students, I ask that they record their observations of each outdoor activity; their feelings toward that activity, if they are a participant, and their motivations in participating; and their assumptions about the feelings and motivations of others they may be observing. Some of the best free writing I have encountered from students has come from these expressions of their own thoughts and feelings concerning their participation. Some have turned to the use of poetry; some have written romantically to express their feelings. Over the duration of the term, their writing can be seen to flow more easily. From the standpoint of the course, their powers of observation increase rapidly and they develop insights into recreational behavior. At the conclusion of the course, I collect the journals and look through them. I do not grade the journals, but the students must keep journals to pass the course.

I also use journal writing in my Conservation course. At the beginning of each topic, I ask students to free write for about five minutes on their perceptions of the topic problem or situation. I also ask them to write down their definition of various terms which they tend to misuse or misunderstand. At the conclusion of each topic, I again ask for five minutes of free writing on how their attitudes may have changed on the topic. At the end of the course, I ask the students to re-read what they have written and then give me a short essay evaluating the changes that may have taken place in their environmental perceptions and attitudes. I do not collect, read, or grade their journals in this course.

From p. 4

⁵Francis Christensen and Bonniejean Christensen, A New Rhetoric (New York: Harper and Row, 1976), p. 56.

⁶Hart, p. 395.

⁷Ibid., p. 396.

⁸Myrna J. Smith, "Bruner on Writing," College Composition and Communication, 28 (May 1977), 131.

⁹Donald M. Murray, A Writer Teaches Writing: A Practical Method of Teaching Composition (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1968), p. 103.

WLA Newsletter

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About WLA Newsletter

The WLA NEWSLETTER began in a workshop on "Writing as a Liberating Activity" at the 1973 NCTE College Section meeting--a workshop emphasizing the role of writing classes in freeing student imagination, broadening student outlook and opinion, and increasing the instructional options of teachers.

Key Editorial Concerns of WLA:

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

Submissions Invited

WLA NEWSLETTER invites college, high school, and middle grades teachers to submit brief articles that relate to one or more of the key editorial concerns and that grow out of practical experiences in writing classes. The WLA format demands that articles be short (usually less than 6 double-spaced pages), that they contain a minimum of quoted material, and that they include documentation parenthetically within the text of the article.

WLA NEWSLETTER
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From the WLA Position Statement

"Writing is a creative act which by its very nature explores relationships between disparate materials and uses language to give new forms to the relationships."

"Writing is a means for one human being to communicate . . . to other human beings, and so a writer must be aware of the clarity of his/her writing for others, recognizing that choices in language, structure, and usage will have a direct influence on the effectiveness of his/her writing." (Excerpted from Issue Two.)

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