

BE PREPARED: A STUDENT ESSAY

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As high school students, we questioned whether students today are being adequately prepared for writing in the future. In an effort to understand this issue, we formed a questionnaire and interviewed some professional writers, some people who write as an integral part of their job, or who teach and judge the writing of students.

We designed our interview to find out about the writers' backgrounds and training, and also about the process they travel through when writing a text. We questioned the following things: 1) their formal and informal training; 2) who and/or what had influenced them to write; 3) and most importantly, what kind of process they go through to write a text, from motivation/inspiration to the drafting and editing.

After we had gathered and analyzed all the information from these interviews, we compared the writing behaviors of these writers to the preparation in writing received by high school students. This was done so we could begin to look for conflict and agreement and consequently form an opinion about the quality of the writing curriculum in the schools. The purpose of this paper is to report the information from the interviews and to discuss our opinions and recommendations.

Concerning background, we found that it was hard to generalize which is more valuable, extensive formal training or natural talent coupled with experience. From all those we interviewed, the amount of formal training ran the gamut from extensive to little or relatively no training. Barbara Poore, editor of the *Peanut Butter Press*, expressed a common view when she stated that her flair for writing comes more from practice and natural talent than from formal training. It seems as though a successful

writer has a mixture of natural talent and experience, but may or may not have extensive formal training.

We wanted to know who or what had influenced those we interviewed to write or to become involved in teaching writing. Ron Strahl, professor of writing at IUPUI, was encouraged by his elementary and junior high teachers to write whenever possible. "While my classmates did their math, I wrote my first book," he explained. This type of encouragement motivated Dr. Strahl to want to become a successful writer as well as a teacher of writing. Donna Monday, a newspaper reporter, said that Erma Bombeck had influenced her to want to write in a particular style. Ms. Monday also stated that her father is a poet and that he had been very influential in encouraging her to write poetry. Sandra Dorste, a professional composer and writer of prose/poetry, said that well-written literature or poetry influenced her desire to write. Lillian Potts, a middle school language arts teacher, felt that her education after high school was most influential in her decision to teach writing. Graduate work, workshops, and actual classroom teaching provided motivation for Ms. Potts, giving her insight into teaching writing in a more creative manner and in changing her own style of writing.

The writers were also asked if they felt reading had an effect on their writing behaviors. Jane Hyatt, a high school language arts teacher and freelance fantasy novelist, stated that reading the Tolkien trilogy influenced her to become a writer. From her reading she grew to love fantasy and science fiction texts and was then influenced to write in this area. Marcia Neese, creator/author of *The Boulder Gang*, a comic strip for children, felt that the reading of other literature for children could have an adverse affect upon her writing. Mrs. Neese wants her books to be fresh; thus, she is cautious about reading many books written for children. Barbara Poore said, "I think reading always influences writing to some degree because the more you experience well-written language, the better you're going to be able to identify what good language is when you start writing yourself." Nelson Price, a newspaper columnist, states that he reads books about history and philosophy which not only serve his interests, but also provide background information for tasks in his job. Ms. Monday finds that her reading preference has been molded by her writing style. Newspaper writing must be done quickly and precisely; therefore, Ms. Monday prefers

to read shorter materials which present their information quickly and efficiently.

Next we asked several of the interviewees about how they went about writing a text. We wanted to know more about the process which they use to write and asked them questions about how they prepare themselves to write. For example, we were interested in knowing about the drafting process they follow and how they determine when a text is finished.

Preparation and inspiration are two important keys in the writing process. We learned from the interviewees that sometimes these events are closely related and at other times only one or the other may be important. We discovered that getting into a routine is the way Dr. Strahl obtains his inspiration to write. He usually sits in his favorite chair, uses his favorite pen, and wears his most cherished hat. His routine is geared toward preparing himself psychologically. Ms. Poore finds that getting up early to write helps her get into a routine. "I always write something important in the early morning because to me early in the morning is when I function best." Others feel that inspiration alone is preparation enough while some writers need to devote hours to gathering materials. When Ms. Hyatt writes fantasy novels, she states that inspiration can be acquired any time and any place. Deadline needs are also a factor in how writers prepare and gain inspiration to write. For Ms. Monday, inspiration isn't something you wait for. "If one needs inspiration, one forces it." In a sense, deadlines are her inspiration. Preparation criteria for Ms. Monday is fairly simple. She sits at her typewriter with her materials and writes until she comes up with a finished article.

Once a first draft has been written, the drafting process begins. It consists of editing one or more drafts and getting some kind of feedback to gain further insight. Newspaper writers can spend only a short time with each story because of deadlines; therefore, they may only have one or two drafts. Nelson Price prefers to use a computer to draft an article. A computer with word processing capabilities helps him to be more efficient in meeting deadlines. In story writing, Ms. Hyatt feels that in order to fully develop the characters and themes of her stories, she must average three to ten drafts. Dr. Strahl, on the other hand, does not have any set number of drafts but feels that the function of the first draft is to organize ideas on paper. Ms. Poore feels that when

writing to obtain a grant she needs at least ten drafts to insure clear and precise language. In summary, we found that the number of drafts necessary to produce a finished text seems to vary greatly depending upon the nature of the material.

Another important element of the writing process is reader feedback. In general the writers we interviewed felt the need to obtain feedback from others. Ms. Poore stated that, "It's a very good experience to have your writing chewed up by someone else and spit back at you." In Ms. Neese's case, she has people from her target age group review her material. Ms. Dorste obtains feedback once she considers her text complete. She told us that she needs to feel comfortable with her text before she seeks a reader's opinion. In her case, confidence about her text is very important. While not all writers we interviewed were always in a position to obtain feedback about their writing, they all agreed that feedback is a positive way to improve the quality of their writing.

As we analyzed the writing behaviors of those we interviewed we realized that much could be learned about how to better prepare today's students for the writing tasks which await in their futures. Writing experiences in the high school years include such assignments as themes, book reports, term papers, lengthy essays, and in some cases, assignments of a journalistic nature. It can be expected that all of these styles of writing will continue in our college experience as well.

To properly prepare students, the writing curriculum should involve a student's natural writing ability with constructive educational experiences. The type and quality of training can influence the outcome of a student's writing ability and also his or her attitude toward the writing task. We feel that more creative writing experiences should take place in the classroom as opposed to the formula writing which is so often taught. Creative or natural writing experiences would bring out the innate writing ability of a student, giving him or her the right to creative expression coupled with good writing instruction in the classroom. Students face many problems when they sit down to write a text. Not only do they not know how to start but they are, in fact, afraid to begin. Drawing from our own experiences, we feel that one helpful thing a teacher could do from time to time is to participate in the writing experience. We feel that if the students were to actually witness

the difficulties which are involved in writing a text, they might be more willing to take the risks necessary to become better writers. We gained a lot of useful information about writers and the writing process from interviewing authors. Perhaps authors should be invited into classrooms to talk to and write along with students thereby providing a meaningful writing experience. This experience, like our experience in writing this article, could help to make students more knowledgeable and comfortable when they write. Finally, in our minds, good writing experiences should include instruction in the editing process. Although most of the people we interviewed were students at the time when rote memorization of grammar rules was popular, they realize a need for more intensive writing experiences which include drafting and editing. We think that the writing process discussed by the interviewed writers needs to be taught in the classroom.

In summation, the suggestions which we have just discussed could be keys which would help students and teachers work together to improve the nature of writing instruction in the schools.

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