

PREDRAFTING: ON HAVING STUDENTS WRITE BEFORE WE TEACH THEM HOW

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(I) PRELIMINARIES

“Have them write before teaching them how to write. Have them *predraft*.” That is, have students do raw drafts to see-and-say before exposing them to the relevant formal “rules.” Odd, and yet amid our mandates to “link theory and practice,” I’ve found that this minor teaching ploy seems to articulate nicely with a half-dozen grand truths (or theories) about writing as a multi-stage process (as we emphasize these days), and also education itself as personal responsiveness not just formula-following (as many students still don’t practice).

By “predrafting” I simply mean having composition students write a draft of a paper which does require or embody a certain writing skill to accomplish its purpose, but *before* I formally teach students much at all about that skill. (i.e., in writing description, I’ll say, “Write to vividly describe a busy scene you observe—library, college cafeteria, rowdy party” *before* I instruct them in the techniques of detailing—sense-imagery, close observation, anecdotes, etc.)

Why do this? And with what grand theories does this petite ploy interlock? First, writing itself requires a multi-stage process—and such predrafting seems to ease students in by stages. And learning itself should connect the self’s experience with formal instruction—and the raw predraft may provide an actual base with which to make the subsequent lecture-demonstration more meaningful. Writing, and education, should be journeys, forays; students, however, still rule-monger, think it’s all a matter of following instructor-supplied road maps. . . .

Nor do I abandon students. I *do* give guidelines for the predrafts—but only light-hand suggestions to foreshadow my ensuing formal instruction, and not to eclipse or upstage their own raw-draft efforts. (If the skill at hand is detailing: “You might use statistics, direct quotations, anecdotes, and concrete sense-imagery in describing that busy cafeteria—if you understand how and if they occur naturally.” Or if the skill is argumentation: “Predraft an effective letter to the editor on an opinion-issue or problem important to you. You might try to make clearly separate arguments, however many; then put them in a ‘best order,’ whatever that might be; and also anticipate, and respond to, your reader’s probable objections to your points of view, as far as you can imagine those objections.”)

But no more “help” than this, now. Not until next hour, when I’ll instruct more completely on the skill in question. With their tentative, nascent predrafts at hand, the students seem to absorb the instruction better, fresh from having actually attempted the goals the writing skill enables. This predrafting, this writing before total formal training in a skill, now seems to me more integrating than inept, connecting the writer’s self, the emerging text, and my formal instruction. I keep on using it. Students approve; with important reservations and cautions noted below.

(II) THE PROCEDURE

Here’s the complete procedure, using that skill of “specific detailing” as an example. As noted above, I first assign a pre-draft of a description (say, the cafeteria at noon hour) and give the light-hand guidance noted above. I may also flash to students, via the overhead projector, a “sample perfect” model of an analogous assignment (“raucous beer party”), this merely to orient, suggest, stimulate. But no more explicit pedagogy than this, at this stage.

Then, next hour, after the students predrafted, I explain the types of detailing I’d previously only mentioned, and introduce a few more (“3W” or Who, When, Where; and analogies). I may then exhibit a stellar instance of the assignment; that cafeteria caught on paper as vividly as I can paint it, for students to compare with their drafts, and maybe criticize too.

Their having predrafted, seems to teach students what they intuitively did right; what they indeed failed to do; how to correct

that too. They see their problems: that they only *told* about, did not show (the crowded salad bar, or traffic jams). But they also see their prowess: where they *did* give a vivid anecdote after all (about wasted food). And they then see how to *improve* (use actual dialog about the complaints; use statistics to prove overcrowding; zoom-in to examine the dirty silverware; use analogy regarding the factory-like conveyor belt; tell Who, When, Where specifically). Their predrafts connect the lecture-instruction to their own recent writing experience.

The lecture also includes the second-stage refinements, the more complex components of the skill which I've delayed presenting until now, until after their predraft. (For detailing, this includes the telling vs. showing concept, also how to spot in one's own manuscript the "holes," or assertions without substantiation. "Holes" includes that perennial problem of "pseudo-examples, as I call them—observations which float too high on the abstraction ladder. "Food fights frequently take place" is not an example really. "Jeff flung a gob of mashed potato on Mark's red plaid shirt," is.)

(III) THE PURPOSES

I now see six functions of pre-drafting. In their ways, all six seem to help interblend formal instruction in writing, with actual student experience of the writing act itself.

(1) *Writing as Process-in-Stages*. Unguided, students tend to write only one unimproved draft, the night before it's due. Predrafting enforces first-drafting, helps insure a base upon which to improve by rewriting later.

(2) *People as Natural Writers After All*. Many students would deny they have any natural ability to write—to sense and shape material on their own. Predrafting lets them essay their own embryonic skills, hands-on fashion, before I lay on formal apparatus.

(3) *"Rules" as Latter-Stage Aids Only*. Students tend to be rulebound, to worry about "the right way" too early in the writing process, thus hobbling discovery. (And many writing courses have put form and rules ahead of substance: "Write a comparison-contrast paper" instead of "Prewrite to discover content, then use the most appropriate form and style.") Predrafting emphasizes discovery first; fine-tuning, only later.

(4) *Role of Writer: Responsible, not Passive*. Some students tend merely to clamber through the formulae of an assignment,

not to stride toward the goal for which the minutiae are merely means. Predrafting may help some, at least, to move toward responsible statement, not simply through order-following.

(5) *Instruction as Programmed in Sequential Stages*. Many students become confused if all the information on a skill—basic, and advanced—is presented at once, without digestion. Predrafting arranges basics early, subtleties later.

(6) *Motivation and Confidence*. Many students lack assurance, don't take risks in writing. Predrafting may let them make fruitful "mistakes" more easily, because the lecture shows them how to correct these, plus may affirm they've done well too.

(IV) SOME PONDERINGS

An aside. Can the predrafting tactic help balance the always-tricky equation between formula and freedom? Too *many* explicit "rules" too early may hobble holistic writing-to-discover, and may make students mechanically follow the form not the spirit—and, more insidiously, may block their making decisions and judgments on their own, a vital component of writing. Of course, too *few* guidelines may allow students to drift and meander, partly because of past educational tradition ("My other teachers always told me exactly how to do it," or, "let us write any way we wanted to"), and partly because of current psychological sloth ("If the teacher doesn't say do it thus and so, who says I have to do anything of much shape at all?"). Perhaps predrafting can splice initiative and instruction, fostering student autonomy somewhat, also guiding somewhat.

A further aside. Perhaps I even instruct too much in how-to? A frontier idea in the revolution in composition teaching is, "We teach less, they write more." Cut formal class-instruction in writing to the bone; one learns the relatively few principles of writing, only by actually writing, anyhow. Fewer droning demonstrations and drills; rather, more tinkering actively with one's own emerging draft. A point here; and yet another point, perhaps more overlooked, is that of getting students to learn the writer's craft—not to write just "intuitively," but to employ skills consciously—but, with flexible command, not in mechanical rule-mongering. For many students, the *instant* I assign or suggest rules, or rather methods, options, techniques, the student *grabs* them as fixed rules, and as the assignment's goal also (Repetition for emphasis?

John wrote a paragraph replete with redundant over-repetition. Specific detailing? Just last week, Diane said, "I believe my paper now has enough examples and support, but it's bad in that I couldn't use all the types of detailing, like statistics." A sad mentality, rule-mongering!). Perhaps "predrafting" can aid toward freeing students from the either-or of slavish formulae-following in a vacuum that aims for only "correctness" and, on the other hand, "just writing," bereft of a disciplined attempt to learn the writer's skills as flexible tools, not rigid rules.

(V) FURTHER APPLICATIONS, AND PITFALLS

Of course, predrafting can be employed to teach many other skills than just detailing and argument. Here are at least four more, for instance:

Instruction, "how-to." Goal: "Enable a lay-novice to perform a skill you know well." Predraft suggestions: "Give all the steps, in the right order, and define all key terms." Lecture: subtleties such as options; pitfalls; quantification; exactly how and why; standards of excellence; troubleshooting.

Prewriting. Goal: "To write better on a topic by free-associating on it first." Predrafting suggestions: "List 25 specifics about a subject before writing a page on it." Lecture: the various techniques of heuristics, induction, etc.

Précis or concise summary. Goal: "To summarize a writing so that somebody could grasp the piece's thesis and points without reading the piece itself." Predraft suggestions: perhaps only the goal above. Lecture: the subtleties of summarizing.

Unity-Coherence-Emphasis. Goal: "To guide the reader through the jungle of your ideas, identifying thesis and points as one goes." Predraft suggestions: short thesis-sentences; keywords; transition words; repetitions; explicit topic sentences. Lecture: demonstrate this cohesive spirit (not just form) of the "five-paragraph theme."

Some teachers now have students generate a mass of semi-exploratory journal drafts in the course's early weeks. These drafts on various subjects and in various styles may sometimes function as "predrafts" to be returned to and elaborated on later in the

course. Whatever the skill being taught, a practical issue here is topic-choice. Should the instructor assign a common class topic for the predraft, or let each student select his own subject? This latter route permits students to use a predraft as a first draft for a polished paper on a subject significant to them. But the common topic does let me show a “sample perfect model” of the assignment in lecture (to let students measure their own predrafts against). A common topic also lets students compare their own predrafts (to appreciate how the same goal can be reached through diverse individual styles).

My students generally approve of predrafting. Their only recurrent caveat is: *never* assign a predraft totally “cold,” without *some* light-hand guidance. The two dangers of too little guidance, they report, are to increase writing anxiety and to waste time and effort by getting too far off the track of what the assignment was to be.

And I too still applaud predrafting, and continue using it for two more personal benefits especially. One is improving my instructions by previewing. If I care to inspect students’ predrafts a day before my formal instruction, I can then dovetail the lecture to the skill-level I find most of the class possesses, fine-tuning thus. Another personal boon of predrafting is increasing feedback to me. If I have students improve their predrafts after the lecture, I can examine the results to assess more precisely exactly what effect my instruction has had upon their abilities. I can see both where I’ve failed to teach a component of a skill, and where I’ve succeeded—both important things for me to know.

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