

CREATION, COMPOSITION, PUBLICATION: PUTTING IT ALL TOGETHER

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“Look at this set of compositions. There is not an idea among the lot. Furthermore, you would think these students had never learned any of the writing rules. Punctuation, capitalization, word usage, organization, sentence structure—all these skills are missing. What a disappointment! Especially since these same students do very well on their language tests and their use of mechanics on exercises.”

Two very different questions about students' ability to use English as an expressive skill are identified in the preceding paragraph. First, how can students' ability to express their perceptions be developed? Second, how can students' skill in using the writing conventions as they prepare a finished composition be built? Then the final question for the teachers becomes, how can these two differing goals be integrated? Researchers and writers have stressed the need for pre-writing experiences and the freedom to write. Others have described the effectiveness of conferencing and peer-editing while others emphasize the need for audience and publication. In addition, teachers are always faced with the need to guide students' practice of grammar and the other writing conventions. How can all these pieces be fit together to make a coherent writing program?

In considering these questions, the first step is to recognize that each question is a separate problem as discussed by Glatthorn. Each problem must be considered at different times using

different techniques. As students deal with the expression of their thoughts, their unique creation, they need to concentrate on that task alone. Only after they have captured the essence of their experience are they ready to analyze and refine the written product. Separation of creation and the study of writing skills is emphasized graphically in the Pyramid of Expression (Figure 1) which illustrates the steps involved in creating a composition. The first steps of writing move from experience through development of awareness to creation. Then the teacher becomes more active as the second phase of composing is encountered including a cooling off period, revising, proofreading and publishing a completed masterpiece.

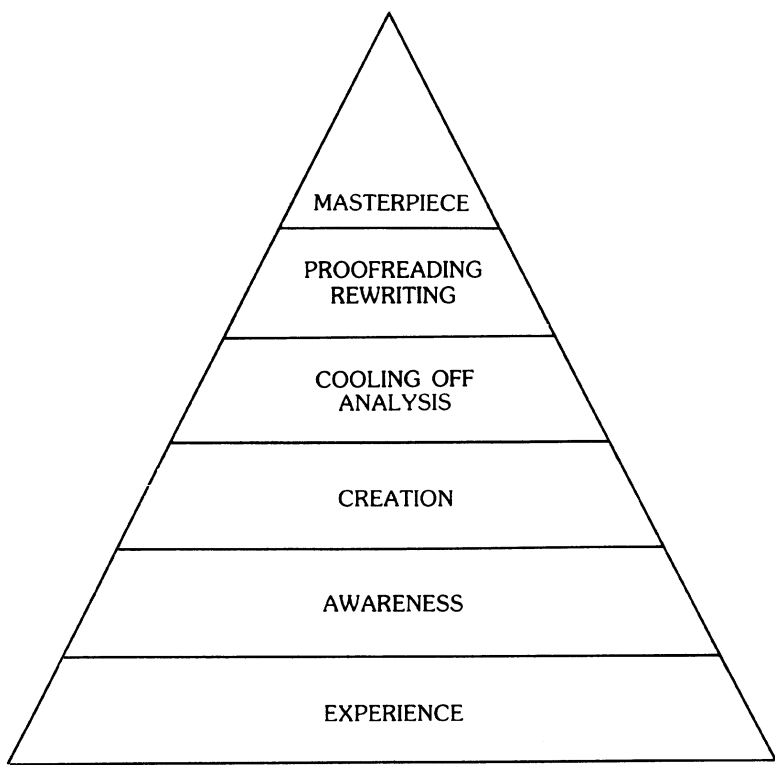


Figure 1: Pyramid of Expression

The Pyramid of Expression also emphasizes the prewriting steps that a student needs to encounter to develop skills in the process of translating experience into language at any level of sophistication. While experience and awareness form the foundation for any composing act, these steps also comprise a major portion of the activity of composition.

EXPERIENCE

Experience to stimulate impression is the essential beginning of expression. The first step is the input phase. Without this raw material nothing happens. The stimulus may be a direct experience guided by the teacher, vicarious experiences, or imagination growing from past experiences. Because children want to write for many purposes, this input will vary, but all writers need to be involved with all these forms of stimuli no matter what their age. Direct experience is especially important for primary grade students but is also needed at regular intervals with all writers. As documented by Holbrook, writing for the teacher's assignment is vastly different from writing to share the writer's experience and is much more difficult. Although students have many personal events and feelings they want to share, they also need to identify that writing does begin with the individual's own experiences by having the teacher progress with them from a new and exciting event to the creation of their own expression. The students must have something they feel is worth communicating. This need for stimulation is the same for production of both self-expressive and practical writing. In fact, Lehr maintains that the distinction between creative and practical writing is an artificial one. Any good piece of practical writing contains many elements of creativity. The students need to become mentally involved with the message and the audience if they are to use the process of communication effectively.

AWARENESS

Even after the students have had the experience, they are still not ready to face that blank sheet of paper. Closely related to this input facet is the need for building the students' awareness. Here the students recall and sort their perceptions. Students need time to discuss their ideas. As they verbalize their impressions they discover what they know, think, and feel about the experience.

By such sharing, each student is able to abstract what the experience meant to her or him. These discussions will take many forms. At first it will be in a group lead by the teacher, but as the students acquire skills in discussing their ideas, they will meet in small groups to talk about the experience as the teacher circulates, questioning, probing, and stimulating extended thought.

The awareness phase serves many purposes. It helps build confidence in each student that she can write. It arouses interest and forms bridges from the students' experiences to their writing. This is also a time for extending students' resources. Students' search for words or phrases to express a thought can be shared in many ways. The effective use of clustering, semantic webbing, mapping, brainwriting, and the use of brainstorming charts are all useful for recording and preserving the students' fleeting impressions has been described by several researchers, among them Boiarsky, Gerston, Rico, Rodrigues, and Thompson. Other activities can also be used to add to the store of words available to express specific feelings. A group may pantomime or act out a situation to stimulate vocabulary and to identify story organization. Related excerpts from literature can be read by the teacher to contribute new vocabulary and new sentence patterns. This group interplay will help students use all the resources available and will enable them to build upon the ideas of others as well as their own.

CREATION

Now is the time to let the students go. The only goal as the students write their initial drafts is to get their ideas onto paper and out of their minds. The first flow of ideas may be in any form—from an organized story to a list of words or notes. They are to get the ideas down without concern for mechanics or spelling. Attention to such details during the first writing slows the thought flow and often stops it completely. The investigation of children's writing done by Graves in the National Institute of Education study conducted at the Writing Process Laboratory of the University of New Hampshire from 1978-1980 underscores the need for children to have freedom to express their ideas without such mechanical restraints.

After the first transfer of inner speech to written speech, the students read their writing to discover what they had to say. As

they continue with preparation of a first draft, the writers revise and rethink their ideas during discussion, using other students and the teacher as resources.

COOLING OFF

A cooling off period is a necessity. No one wants to dissect creation while still sharing the glow of her heroine/hero battling in the winning run. While the students let their ideas jell, the teacher works with an in-depth analysis of the writing. This does not mean discouraging the creativity by red-penciling the errors. Research by Sheal & Woods has shown that the person who practices locating errors is the person who retains knowledge of usage. So teachers must allow students the opportunity for this practice.

If the intellectual climate of the room is such that accuracy is paramount and takes priority over discovery and exploration, the teacher may destroy the very thing she seeks. A wise teacher welcomes a student trying a new word even if it is misused or misspelled or both. That misused word is the raw material with which to build a student's word power. As Weaver pointed out, errors are welcomed as a sign of students' growth in the intuitive use of conventions and as a sign of their readiness for instruction. But that opportunity must be handled carefully. Don't use the red-pencil scalpel lest Bill or Mary tells you what John once said: "I'm never going to use new words again when writing for you." Of course I asked him why, as he intended I should. "Because when I try them," he said firmly, "they're likely to be spelled wrong and you mark them out in red. It's cheaper to use words I already know and have them right."

Even if the teacher doesn't mark the papers to show her proof-reading skills, the teacher still has many tasks. According to Bissex, it is important to make comments about a succinct phrase, an apt description, a fast moving plot on each paper as this was shown to lead to additional efforts. The student's or teacher's sharing of these gems later during rewriting sessions will add to the resources of all the students as well as build the individual's concept of himself as a writer. Questions such as, "How do you think Grady felt?" or, "I'm anxious to discover where Nancy was," also recognize the power of the students' ideas and guide their efforts during the rewriting sessions. The key to these responses is their non-judgmental form according to the work done by Johnson. The

collection of information about individual and group needs is another important facet of the teacher's analysis during this cooling off period. This information will identify the areas which need emphasis during the rewriting sessions and will suggest how the teacher can best provide that guidance.

REWRITING: EDITING AND REVISING

Editing and revising means reconsideration of the idea content, the form, and the audience. During the first phase of rewriting a student will ask and answer questions formulated by the class such as:

Who is going to read my story?

Do I need to expand, illustrate, emphasize any ideas?

Do I need to limit the story, delete some ideas?

Is the story worth "publishing" or should I leave it and start a new story (report, letter)?

Is this the effect I want the reader to get?

At this time the student and teacher can decide whether to share the revised expression orally or as a written publication. By no means will all drafts be selected for publication (perhaps one in four). A balanced program in composition includes activities in which the final responsibility for polish is intrinsic to the aim of the writing. But many compositions (especially as students are working toward mastery of expression in the elementary school) are best shared through a more or less polished oral presentation. It may consist of the student choosing to act out his composition, to read it aloud himself after careful practice, or even to have it read by a skilled reader. The teacher's dramatic reading can enhance the faltering trials of the beginning writer and convince him that he is a real author. This stimulation is often the key to a student's growth as a writer.

REWRITING: PROOFREADING

When the students have decided to make their work public, they get help in proofreading from a class-constructed proofreading chart, other students, and the teacher. This proofreading becomes the practice in using writing convention with their own materials and a purpose which is important to each student.

The proofreading chart is developed by members of the class

to guide their use of the conventions of writing based on the teacher's analysis of their compositions. An example of a proof-reading chart might be:

Step 1 - Do my sentences make sense?

Step 2 - Are my word pictures clear and sharp?

Step 3 - Did I use all the punctuation I need?

Step 4 - Am I sure all the words are spelled correctly?

Step 5 - Check the little things, margins, titles.

Students are guided to reread their papers once for each step on the chart. Thus the number of steps needs to be limited if the students are to follow all steps. Details to be considered under each step will depend on the skills of each student and the previous instruction. As students attempt to use new language skills in their writing, e.g. quotations, subordinate clauses, they are given instruction in the particular skills, and these items are then added to the chart.

The teacher introduces proofreading and the use of guidelines by modeling. Seeing and reading a paragraph on the board containing sample errors followed by group editing and then rereading the edited paragraph is one effective technique. Another strategy is the use of "group-proofreading" by four or five students as described by Fox. Editing a student's composition to match her oral reading for a small group is another activity which models proofreading. This is especially useful when introducing proofreading and is an effective means of teaching writing conventions. During these introductory activities, the teacher stresses and models the standard that each time a paper is read there must be positive comments about the student's efforts and only positive suggestions for revision are made. Discussions about writing are always focused on changes to clarify and extend the message for the reader according to Estabrook. Remember, the student's own discovery is worth a dozen of the teacher's remarks. Instead of saying, "Billy, you didn't describe your cat" try, "This is exciting. That was a smart cat. What did he look like?" (Billy describes the cat.) "Can you put some of that in your story? I think the reader would like to know about it."

After the student has completed editing and proofreading, the teacher again analyzes the composition. This analysis will identify errors that indicate which students need instruction in specific skills (Weaver). First draft efforts which were corrected indicate

that the student can use the skill and needs only more practice during writing to have the skill become automatic. If the writing has been selected for publication, the teacher pencils in any additional corrections missed by the student. The teacher also records the correct spelling of misspelled words on individual file cards under the date or title of the paper but makes no marks on the paper. As the students prepare to make a final perfect copy, they use this card to locate any misspelled words themselves and make the corrections. This listing also becomes a resource for the students' individual spelling study.

If a decision has been made in favor of another creative experience instead of a final recopying to prepare a masterpiece, the teacher responds to the student's efforts, makes notes of instructional needs and helps the student prepare for oral sharing or stimulates him in a new writing venture rather than in recopying the paper for publication.

PUBLISHED MASTERPIECE

A major stimulus for students' writing is the opportunity to share their ideas with others. Every student must continuously have some of his work being used for communication in some manner. It may be displayed on the bulletin board, the classroom walls or even in the hall, published in a book, mailed to a pen pal or sent home. Whatever the form, the students' communication to others of their perceptions is the only reason for them going through all the steps following the initial experience. This impetus even acts as motivation for practicing penmanship skills as they prepare a final perfect copy. However, a balance is vital. If everything a student writes must be proofread and rewritten into a final copy, the student will write less and less. Thus, the teacher and the student must consider each composition as it fits the student's total needs.

As can be seen from the above, the use of this six-step writing cycle places the learning activities of rewriting and proofreading with the student and reduces the teacher's editing tasks. It also provides individualized material for the student's practice of writing conventions which comes with built-in motivation. As stressed by Turbill, this extended involvement of students with their own ideas

provides time for them to write and frees the teacher to work in depth with small groups or an individual student.

When students follow their own ideas through the expression steps, they study and practice writing conventions as they create, revise, and edit their own materials. This practice addresses the question raised in the first paragraph and in many research studies (Braddock, et. al, 1963; Meckel, 1963), "How can skills in using writing conventions taught during practice exercises be transferred to students' compositions?" When students receive instruction in writing conventions while using these tools as a part of their expressive writing activities there is no need for transfer. The student is learning language by writing.

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