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ABSTRACT

Intended for writing teachers, from middle-elementary level through college, this booklet describes a teaching method that lets students write their own way into ideas, merging personal experience with intellectual thought in expository writing. The booklet first describes in greater detail the concept of writing to think as focused free writing--required but not graded or revised--that allows students to bring vague perceptions to a verbal level explicit enough for them to reconsider or extend. It then presents four examples, writing samples from two students who write easily and two who have difficulty, to illustrate different kinds of mindwork made possible by this kind of thinking on paper. Discussion of the examples focuses on the personal and intellectual qualities present in the writings. (HTH)

WRITING TO THINK

by

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National Writing Project
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The National Writing Project is an effort by school teachers, college faculty, and curriculum specialists to improve the teaching of writing at all levels of education. The Project is funded by the Carnegie Corporation of New York, the National Endowment for the Humanities, the School of Education of the University of California, Berkeley, local universities, school districts, and other funding agencies. The findings of this study do not necessarily represent the views of the National Endowment for the Humanities or the Carnegie Corporation of New York. Individuals desiring information concerning the National Writing Project should write to National Writing Project, Tolman Hall, University of California, Berkeley, California 94720.

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Writing to think—the writing I describe below—emerged in response to two very different teaching dilemmas.

I teach both experienced and inexperienced writers in an open admission community college. In one way or another, they all want to learn and need to be shown the forms and formats that those of us who have achieved academic success take for granted; these may range from how to organize material, how to support inference with evidence, or how to begin an essay, to how to spell and punctuate, or even when to indent and when to capitalize. I taught my courses with these needs in mind. But when formal elements became too important—and for students they often did—I felt as if I were teaching other lessons as well, hidden but clear: namely that struggling for meaning is not desirable; that successful academic writing lacks spark, lacks feeling, and perhaps even mind as long as it is formally in control and mechanically correct. My gnawing fear was that in helping students gain access to academia—to the 4-year college, the transfer English class, the proficiency or entrance test—I was at the same time helping to create barriers that separated them from their own thought and language.

I then tried a different classroom approach, but soon faced a second dilemma. I based the composition course on personal experience writing. I found (and still find) this approach invigorating and liberating because it puts the student back in the center of his or her own writing and learning. Students liked to write. They wrote a great deal, and some of their writing was vivid, eloquent, and had a strong sense of voice. But when they were asked to write more analytical essays, in response to a text or to ideas that came from outside their immediate experience, many of these same students seemed at a loss, unprepared. They lost interest.

Here, for example, are excerpts from two essays written by the same student within a two week period:

> *It was April, 1970. I was in the hospital. I didn't want to be there, but my mother and doctor insisted. Lying in the bed, I thought of the horrible procedures one goes through having an operation. Of course it was my imagination, my mother told me, but I had a good one ....*
>
> *...I became frightened when he approached my throat with a pair of surgical scissors. I began choking. "DON'T COUGH," said the Doctor. I was strangling with blood. I could hear the scissors ripping at my throat. It sounded like cutting of paper. Finally I could breathe when the doctor removed my tonsils.*

and

> *The consumer today is of a mixed mind. While demand-pull helps cause inflation, economics is at an unstable condition. While we the consumer see a lot that we do not like, particularly inflation, we begin to worry. We worry about business conditions; how it will leave us in the coming year. But tho the consumer worries, they still think that now is the time to buy....*

Why, I asked. Why can personal experience writing not become intellectual experience writing? Why can a student not begin with ideas or issues, and generate clear and lively prose from there? I seemed able to help students write vividly about their experience but unable to help them make the transition to the academic writing—to discussing ideas instead of experience—that is required for success in college. I even tried bringing together the two approaches, hoping one would help the other, but it never worked. There was no bridge connecting the formal, flat, often mindless composition and the vivid, egocentered, personal experience narrative.

This widening gap left me feeling more and more uncomfortable. In one approach, academic competence (if reached) seemed purchased at the price of voice, style, even content. Too often the writing seemed disconnected from its author, from an active mind at work. In the other, the price for strong and vivid writing seemed to be a disconcerting egocentricity. Lively language and refreshing ideas often were confined to writing that began within the writer's own lived experiences. Asked to consider ideas that came from without, the writing, and sometimes even the writer, collapsed.

What I needed was a teaching practice that let students write their own way into ideas, that let them see how personal experience can become intellectual experience. If I could let them write their own way into ideas, I argued to myself, I would also be showing them a way into the academic world they sought to enter.

* * *

The teaching practice which I call Writing to Think—and by think I mean simply that inward activity of mind that lets us make connections—is designed to serve that purpose. We make connections: between ideas and experience; between new material and what we already know; between associative and logical thinking; between feeling and thinking; between unconscious and more aware levels of understanding. The list can go on. To begin that network of connections seems to underlie all thought and learning. One might even say that making connections is mind at work.

No one can predict and so no one can prescribe the particular connections an individual learner needs to make to find his or her way into an unfamiliar intellectual environment. Yet as teachers we want to help students enter this new environment and make it their own.

The kind of writing that I am proposing here offers such help. It begins with the notion that new ideas and facts will almost always evoke in the student's mind at least a dim response, an intuitive perception, a visual image, a hunch. The idea is to provide a situation that allows students to find words and form sentences, and so make that perception, image or hunch more explicit.

By saying in words what they vaguely think or sense, students can bring vague perceptions to a verbal level, explicit enough for them to reconsider, perhaps to extend. Since the emphasis is on thought-in-process, the student's tone can be tentative and exploratory, in contrast to the tone of a thesis sentence which we often insist be firm and which at least pretends to be authoritative.

Permitting students to explore vague but new perceptions within themselves and bring them to verbal consciousness is to enable them also to make new connections with the outer world: with a theory or philosophy, an essay or poem or play that are the products of someone else's thought and fantasy. It also works with math problems or chemistry concepts. It works in the twelfth grade, even the fourth grade, as well as in college.

Such writing thus becomes a bridge, or, perhaps a more appropriate image, a switchboard for the mind. In process, it seems to connect inner speech and spatial representations to writing while by-passing oral expression (although "think-writing" may have some of the elements of oral language), thus moving written expression to a primary place in the student's experience.

What I am proposing is student writing that is required, but that is non-revised, non-edited, non-graded. It can be done in the course of any number of our familiar methods of teaching: focused free writing, focused free thinking, journal writing, learning logs, reading logs, timed writings, writing-across-the-curriculum, in-class or out-of-class writing.[1]

It can focus on personal experience. But my central point is that it can also focus on what comes from *outside* the students' lived experiences, from the intellectual environment around them: text, lecture, question. Paradoxically, although it comes from the outside, it then assists in the crucial transition from personal experience writing to intellectual experience writing, and from there to the developed thesis or idea essay.

This is a kind of focused but free thinking through writing that we don't encourage regularly or systematically enough in our classrooms. Pat D'Arcy, English Adviser to teachers in the county of Wiltshire, England, makes that point so clearly in her booklet on connected and disconnected writing. "The kinds of thinking that learners need to do," she says, "involve a great deal of collecting together, then sorting and resorting before they can hope for any really clear patterns to emerge .... We rarely allow or encourage them to feel at ease about this disorganized part of the learning process in spite of the fact that it is often crucial if any permanent grasp of the new and the unfamiliar is to be achieved."[2]

Such thinking on paper is a high-risk activity, particularly at first. Trying out ideas in writing entails the courage to be uncertain and to expose that uncertainty at a moment when it seems that "everyone else knows." It involves the risk of exposing certainties which others may see as foolish or as opinionated. It exposes strong feelings, bad sentences, poor spelling—the risks are many. But perhaps because it is risky in just this way, once students accept this kind of writing as a regular task it gets around that self-censorship that inhibits active thought in most other writing situations.

* * *

The four examples below illustrate different kinds of mindwork made possible by this kind of thinking on paper. Gary, Genoveva, Nina, and Nancy all wrote in response to a Shakespeare play *(King Lear, 2 Henry IV)* although only Nancy had read any Shakespeare before. Gary and Genoveva were students for whom writing meant struggle; Nina and Nancy wrote easily. The "assignments" varied slightly. Gary's and Nina's were in a second semester freshman composition class; we had read *King Lear* through once, and I then assigned three separate twenty minute writings before the next class meeting. Genoveva's assignment, also from a second semester freshman composition class, was more restricted—a ten minute in-class writing in response to these lines:

Lear: Does any here know me? This is not Lear.
Does Lear walk thus? Speak thus? Where are his eyes?
Either his notion weakens, his discernings
Are lethargied—Ha! Waking? 'Tis not so.
Who is it that can tell me who I am?

Fool: Lear's shadow.

Nancy's passage is from a Shakespeare class, an excerpt on *2 Henry IV* from her Shakespeare journal.

Gary was an art major, more attuned to visual and graphic forms than to words. He had never read a Shakespeare play, and he begins with what he enjoyed most, probably understood first. (Initially, I follow Ken Macrorie's advice and tell students—should they feel themselves getting stuck—to keep pen to paper, repeating words if necessary; this instruction accounts for the "Kent Kent Kent" of line four in his writing below.)

Gary:

I thoroughly enjoyed Kent. I feel that he played the guiding factor of that of which the fool brought out in Lear. Lear was fortunate for I feel he would have gone mad without him. He was an unselfish, loving and dedicated friend that Lear Kent Kent Kent Kent Kent Kent Kent Kent Kent Kent could not accept at one apoint for Kent saw in Lear his foolishness of dividing his kingdom between ungrateful daughters but Lear once again could not stand the truth thrown in his

face and attempted to exile Kent. But there was no way that Kent could be banished for he was a part of Lears mind and the only way Lears mind could possibly stay intact was by having Kent close at hand but in an obscure way. The more I think of it its like Lears mind was taken apart and different parts of it were viewed as different characters....

Note that the idea that emerges with such clarity by line seven—"But there was no way that Kent could be banished for he was a part of Lears mind"—is there in sentence two—"I feel that he played the guiding factor of that of which the fool brought out in Lear"; it is almost hidden by words, hidden probably from himself as well, but there; he almost loses it, comes back to it, refines it, and then it's clear. The clarity of the sentence reflects the clarity of the thought, which then triggers another and another. Twenty minutes of focused but free thinking through writing encourages him to work a cloudy perception into words and sentences; as he forms sentences, he makes explicit his perception and so continues to generate his own meaning.

Genoveva generates meaning somewhat differently. She writes:

King Lear is lost. Good, I like that. Big men can also be lost, not only the other people. Well, I think that big people has more reason to get lost than the people who are dependent on the big ones. I suppose that big people are responsible for the other people's life. But what is all about this King? He is lost because he is tired maybe. Anyway the fool tells the King that his shadow can tell what he is. And I wonder, maybe his shadow is as lost as he is. What is a shadow anyway? We need darkness and light to reflect our shadow. OK. We have to stand in the middle of the two in order to give shape to our shadow. And the shadow will stand in the light....

Unlike Gary, Genoveva does not keep circling back to a veiled first thought; instead she seems to be proceeding *towards* a thought: "What is a shadow anyway? We need darkness and light to reflect our shadow. OK. We have to stand in the middle of the two in order to give shape to our shadow...."

English is Genoveva's second language. Her connection may be the simplest (and perhaps the most courageous) of the lot: the risk to try it in English. Her speech was often very difficult to understand and so she rarely talked in class; her papers were labored, revised again and again. I suspect that more often than not she reached English via her Spanish. This kind of timed in-class writing thus presented a particularly threatening situation, but she risked it and came up with thought, in English, that also helped generate that day's class discussion.

Line four—"But what is all about this King?"—raises an interesting question. I had assumed this to be an attempt at English idiom (What's this all about?) with syntax slightly askew. After I had discussed Genoveva's writing at a recent Bay Area Writing Project workshop, however, an experienced ESL teacher, Susan Park-Erwin, commented that this "was the best line for me. I

don't hear a syntax problem, but rather a marvelous statement of spatial relationship. But what is *all about* this King? shadow, power, little, big." Her reading suggests a link being made from an inner spatial representation to words and sentences.

Interestingly enough, by the end of the passage, when Genoveva seems caught up in her own thinking, she expresses herself in fine idiomatic English sentences. She had more English available than she suspected.

Both Genoveva and Gary work themselves to ideas, and for Gary it turned out that yes, that's what he means. But it could also have turned out differently. Not every thought leads to an understanding. Two out of three times it might lead nowhere or seem off-center. Nonetheless we must continue to encourage students to grope to a more or less secure thought, and so we must permit them to be tentative. In another class, in response to specific questions, one student wrote: "I can't come right out and answer those questions bluntly, but I think I have some ideas." I translate this as saying "I've got a hunch, and it may turn out OK (I think I have some ideas) but I'm not at all sure." She needs permission to test her hunch, explore it, withdraw it; permission to make explicit her tentativeness.

In this context, all of the advice students still hear from misguided teachers about not using "I" or "I think," "I suppose," "I wonder" (Genoveva uses all these), or about not using hedges such as "maybe" or "perhaps" is bad advice. It serves as a deterrent. Without these remnants from oral speech, what students are thinking and saying would then sound like clear interpretations, authoritative statements at a point when they feel no such authority. Both teacher *and* student must be clear that the immediate purpose of this kind of writing is exploration, not certainty.

Written fluency is an important pre-requisite for writing that asks students to "think about" things that are usually outside their initial range of concern or interest.[3] Gary and Genoveva were just barely fluent. Nina and Nancy, however, felt much easier with words and paper. When freed from the constraints of the graded formal essay, they and students like them often show an astonishing willingness to risk uncertainty.

Nina, a pianist and music major, begins with one line from *King Lear,* takes off, and clearly enjoys herself. In class we had talked some about the last lines of the play ("The weight of these sad times we must obey, / Speak what we feel, not what we ought to say"); she handed in one single-spaced page, typed to the very bottom, ending full circle from where she began and where the play ends:

> *Lear says take physic pomp; expose thyself to feel what wretches feel, and gloucester says each man have enough, distribution should undo excess, my, these boys are coming around—but it is so curious to me how between the haves and the have-nots it always takes direct experience on the part of the haves to*

lose it and suddenly be a have-not before these people see what it's all about—I mean how do people shelter themselves, insulate their private lives from screaming multitudes the world over—of course they are very riche so they can afford the very best ear plugs money can buy, and they can move into the finest condominium or castle with sauna jacuzzi golf course security guns piranha-infested moats radar electric fences big dogs gates locks keys swimming pools jack-in-the-boxes all your needs gasoline right there, no need to leave however what in actuality makes me curious is how they veil protect the conscience, what kinds of padlocks security surround the conscience it is only true once out of a million that they just didn't know, how do they ignore, tune out, forget, drown out, how do they not care? what kinds of stories can they invent to make it all seem fitting and just that they can have most, and the most have nothing? in spite of aristocracies and monarchies and happy pesant serfs, how many variations on a theme of social darwinism can a duke earl come up with in a lifetime? and then, is it a pushover? I mean, does he fall for his own line without an argument, is he easily convinced, does he slap his thigh and shout "I'll buy that!... Bartender, 'nother round." or is there trouble—while he is roasting his leg of glutton or peasant under glass is he seized by sudden shivers of fear of doubt does it interfere with sleep, with wake, with living and dying does he make appointments once every six months with his gnawing sense of doubt? how easy is it mellon? is it a gas rocky? strip away the stocks and bonds and winter homes and presidencies and executiveships and holdings and estates and chauffeurs and greenbills and suits and rings and closets filled with shoes and 2,000 dollars a month for make-up for jackie, at least we know how thick her mask is—or strip away your basic poverty-stricken shack and your basic rags you still have your essence, your basic human being—there seems to be a shortage of empathy compassion or maybe just common sense—people who see, who know, who don't have to take physic before they understand are too rare. I want more of them, I'm sick of the others, yes lets try it again, once more, with feeling....

As Nina ranges from text to thought to feeling to question to judgment to text, her writing links some of her own political and moral concerns to those expressed in the play. Her puns—peasant under glass, legs of glutton—are better than most, but not unusual; pockets of imagery suddenly become accessible. Focused but free thinking on paper often has an instinctive style, and so helps create a personal voice. In many ways this is a better piece of sustained writing than her more formal papers, but that is one of the advantages. We—teacher *and* student—get to see a range of response and a capacity with language that often remain invisible if we see only formal papers or drafts of formal papers.

Like Gary and Genoveva, Nina generates her meaning as she goes along, although in other ways her writing is very different. She surprised us all and perhaps even herself with her verbal wit and expressive fluency. A load of

associations seemed to be crowding her. This, it seems, is one instance where only written expression could release all these ideas in her head. No one talks this way.

Nancy's writing is less ebullient, more reflective than Nina's. She is the only one of these four students who has always "liked English" and always "been good in English." As she weaves back and forth between text and experience, associative thinking and discursive reasoning, she uses her own associations to deepen the text, and the text to clarify her own experiences, a ranging that we take for granted but rarely encourage in classwork.

> *In Act IV scene 5 of pt 2, I am struck by the emotional reality. The deathbed reconciliation, the final understanding at the end of the rivalry between father and son is something we all long for, but Shakespeare makes obvious the ambivalence we feel towards those closest to us. Hal's taking the crown touched a chord. My mother has several diamond rings. Every time I visit her in Florida, I try them on, looking at my hands in her diamonds. I know that when my mother dies, her diamonds will be mine. I've often felt regretful that I won't get them until I'm well into middle-age, although my lust to adorn myself in diamonds certainly would not warrant my mother's death. I'm just now at the age at which my mother is in my 1st memories of her. As I grow into the role she played for me with my own son, I sometimes feel as if I'm taking over her personality. It's inevitable to supplant one's parent and I imagine most people react to it with mixed feelings. The power of the parent wanes as the child grows strong and mature.*
>
> *Does Hal want his father to die and so imagines him dead? Hal seems at least to want to think him dead in order to try on his crown, to see himself in his father's role, just as children try on adult's clothing. I don't think this half-hearted death wish is unusual or that it indicates that Hal doesn't love Henry as a son should. I think the ambivalent feelings between parent and child are wonderfully articulated in this scene. Hal's joy at finding Henry alive is apparent despite his natural interest in taking over the role Henry is leaving. These close family ties are not cut and dried moral issues....*

Like Nina, Nancy is finding a personal writing voice that is not bound to private experience; it reveals a feeling and thinking mind at work, one that is not fearful of revealing (and discovering) the connections *within* that mind.

* * *

Gary, Genoveva, Nina, and Nancy are writing in response to literature, but they could just as well be responding to essays, to debates, to points of conflict or disagreement; to new information, new ideas, new concepts. Such thinking and writing always serve the writer more than the reader, yet I always read these writings. Sometimes I read them aloud; often students read each other's. I do not grade them, nor do I correct them. Neither I nor student considers

them first drafts or mini-papers. A semester's work, of course, includes regular essays and reports that often go through several drafts, but when students think on paper, there is nothing to be rewritten or reworked, although sometimes there is more to be thought.

To make possible this thinking on paper, it must be freed not only from conventional external judgments but also from conventional external demands. I suspect that even while we talk "process," our emphasis often shifts to the finished product, to revision and editing. The long-range result is poignantly described by a teacher of writing as he reflects on his own writing and revision process. "I can see," he says, "that I have a deficiency: I edit for correctness before I commit a sentence to writing. Although I have developed strategies for editing that produce correct and fairly coherent writing, *I suffer from a loss of contact with the sense that underlies writing.* [my italics] I apply filters for correctness and logic very early in the composing process; what I produce, therefore, is a rather impersonal and objective prose which has very little to do with my own experiencing."[4]

The writing I have described here has everything to do with the writer's own experiencing. It is personal and it is intellectual. Freed from all our warnings (be coherent, be logical, be correct, be clear, be concise, know what you want to say), it permits students to engage more of their minds and brains; it helps them make connections which, when the connections click, feels like finding one's own meaning. Active, often invigorating and releasing, it offers one way for students to think with impunity, and in the process it often helps them like to write and to write better.

Notes

[1]Discussions of various forms of non-revised writing can be found in the following books and articles: Brown, J. *et al. Free Writing! A Group Approach.* Rochelle Park, New Jersey: Hayden Book Company, 1977; Elbow, Peter. *Writing Without Teachers.* New York: Oxford University Press, 1973; Flinn, Jane Zeni. "Journals: Write More-Grade Less." *Classroom Practices in Teaching English 1979-1980.* Ed. Gene Stanford, Chair and the Committee on Classroom Practices. Urbana: NCTE, 1979; Fulwiler, Toby E. "Journal Writing Across the Curriculum." *Classroom Practices in Teaching English 1979-1980.* Ed. Gene Stanford, Chair and the Committee on Classroom Practices. Urbana: NCTE, 1979; Howgate, Lynn. *Building Self-Esteem Through the Writing Process.* Berkeley: The National Writing Project, 1982; Macrorie, Ken. *Searching Writing.* Rochelle Park, New Jersey: Hayden Book Company, 1980; Macrorie, Ken. *Telling Writing.* Rochelle Park, New Jersey: Hayden Book Company, 1973; Macrorie, Ken. *Uptaught.* Rochelle Park, New Jersey: Hayden Book Company, 1970; Mahieu, Patricia and McCray, Elizabeth. "Increasing Writing without Increasing Grading." *Classroom Practices in Teaching English 1979-1980.* Urbana: NCTE, 1979; Martin, Nancy, *et al. Writing and Learning Across the Curriculum 11-16.* London: Ward Lock Educational, 1976; Moffett, James and Wagner, Betty Jane. *Student-Centered Language Arts and Reading, K-13: A Handbook for Teachers.* Second Edition. Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1976; Moore, Thomas R. and Reynolds, Joseph. "The Journal: A Practical Option for Teaching Writing." *Classroom Practices in Teaching English 1979-1980.* Urbana: NCTE, 1979; Progoff, Ira. *At a Journal Workshop: The Basic Text and Guide for Using the Intensive Journal.* New York: Dialogue House Library, 1975; Wotring, Anne Miller. "Writing to Think About High School Chemistry." *Two Studies of Writing in High School Science.* Berkeley: Bay Area Writing Project, 1982.

[2]Pat D'Arcy, *The Examination Years: Writing in Geography, History and Social Studies,* (London: Ward Lock Educational, School Council Publications, 1978), pp. 6-7.

[3]Basic writing students, still struggling to get words on paper, most often achieve fluency by writing from their own store of remembered experiences. These students may be less able to use or benefit from writing that asks them to add to or amend that store by processing new material that comes from the outside.

[4]Quoted by Sondra Perl in an addendum to "Case Material on Vern: The Composing Processes of Writing Teachers," National Institute of Education, 1981.

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