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INSTITUTE FOR Writing and Rhetoric

Teaching Writing as Process

PROCESS VS. PRODUCT

For the purpose of this particular discussion, it's perhaps useful to make a distinction between writing-as-process and writing-as-product. While these distinctions may not hold up under deep scrutiny, they were useful in the early years of Composition Studies as a way of talking not only about what students write, but also about how they write. James McCrimmon, for instance, understood this distinction as the difference between writing as a way of knowing (process) and writing as a way of telling (product). Donald Murray defined it as the difference between internal and external revision (revising in order to clarify meaning for oneself vs. revising in order to clarify meaning for the reader). Linda Flower framed it as the difference between writer-based and reader-based prose. Though these theorists differ in their definitions of the distinction between process- and product-oriented writing, they do agree on one point: good product depends on good process.

THE ELEMENTS OF THE WRITING PROCESS

While we can parse the writing process in various ways, each with its own limitations, we believe that it's useful to see writing as a three-step recursive process of invention, composition, and revision. Some students arrive in college with strategies for managing all these steps of the writing process; others have habits that have served them in high school but that limit them in college; still others have no strategy for writing at all. Teachers of first-year writing will benefit from knowing what an individual student's writing process is. They will also benefit from having an array of methods to help their students move successfully through the writing process.

INVENTION

Invention includes everything that a student does before beginning to compose a paper. Of course, students don't stop inventing when they've begun to compose. And they are composing even as they invent. But for the sake of this conversation, we'll let the categories stand. We've classified invention into five activities: reading as a writer, generating ideas, organizing ideas, contextualizing ideas, and coming up with a working thesis. You may want to add to this list with activities of your own. In any case, we encourage you to design your course so that the various methods of invention are taught, discussed, and reflected on.

Reading as a writer. With many academic papers, invention begins with reading a text (here we use "text" broadly to include everything from books, to works of art, to results of scientific experiments, to cultural, social, and economic systems). Students sometimes read these texts passively, satisfying themselves with absorbing the information in front of them. Instead they need to read actively, raising questions or challenging the writer as they read. Instructors can help their students to read like writers by encouraging them to scribble up the margins of their books with questions and quibbles. Students should be encouraged to look for patterns. They might also note allusions that they don't understand (with the idea that they'll do a little research to enhance their understanding).

Generating Ideas. Seasoned writing instructors offer students several strategies for generating ideas. Some of these ideas—like using Aristotle's topoi—are time-tested. Others—like asking students to freewrite, or brainstorm, or write a discovery draft (a bit like freewriting, but with more focus)—are more informal and can be used not only to come up with a topic but also to nudge a student out of a writing funk. Perhaps the best way of helping students to generate ideas is through good old-fashioned dialogue. Asking questions—both in conference and in writing workshops—models for students a way of interrogating their ideas that will yield better papers. With practice, students will internalize these methods of inquiry and will apply them to all of their academic tasks.

Organizing Ideas. Students have several strategies to choose from when organizing their ideas. Some students draft formal outlines and follow them faithfully as they write. Others make informal outlines that they revise as they draft. Some students find that sketching a paper works best for them: they start by writing down a possible thesis and then filling the page with related ideas, drawing arrows to establish possible connections, and using circles or stars or checkmarks to determine which ideas should be prioritized. Some students look for umbrella ideas and try to cluster related ideas beneath them. Still others write short paragraphs to try to summarize their thinking. While students should be permitted to use the organizing strategies that work for them, sometimes young writers rely overmuch on one organizational strategy. If this strategy isn't working, they get stuck. At this point, you can enter the student's process and demonstrate how a different organizational strategy might be effective.

Contextualizing Ideas. Sometimes students don't have a good sense of where their argument fits in the ongoing academic conversation, and so they can't determine the point (or the structure) of their paper. Doing some research can help. Show your students how to contextualize their ideas. In a writing workshop or in a conference, select one of their ideas, and then ask: What is the history of this idea? What else has been said on this topic that is relevant to our discussion? How does it relate to other ideas that we've been discussing? What do the dissenting voices have to say? How might we answer them? Asking these kinds of questions not only moves students into the ongoing academic conversation, it also gives them a sense of how to craft an introduction, when it comes time to write one.

Coming Up With A Working Thesis. The last step in the invention process (and the first formal step of the composing process) is coming up with a working thesis (or thesis question). Advise students to post the thesis where they can see it as they write: this sentence, if well crafted, will help the writer to stay focused on the argument she is trying to make. Do let the student know that, at this stage, they have only a working thesis—most writers revise their theses as they go, in order to accommodate shifts in perspectives and new ideas.

For materials on invention and thesis development that you can share with your students see Coming Up With Your Topic and Developing Your Thesis.

COMPOSING

To compose a text is a difficult task. A writer sits at the keyboard, facing a blank screen, and must make the decisive first step that will begin the writing process. Some young writers get blocked: either they are perfectionists who keep writing the same first sentence again and again, trying to get it right, or they are terrified of making a decision and so continue to stare at the page as the clock ticks on. Other young writers have no trouble with writer's block, but they have trouble shaping their thoughts into a coherent essay. These writers see writing simply as the process of getting what's in their head onto the page - once they've done a "brain dump" they think that the paper is finished. They don't yet recognize the need to revisit their paper, to re-envision it, and to revise it.

Students need better strategies. Experienced writers understand composing as a recursive process. As experienced writers draft, they discover new ideas and unexpected problems. At these junctures, they return to earlier processes: they brainstorm, re-sketch their ideas, re-write their outlines. They inevitably revise or refine their theses. Some young writers will find this process discouraging. By modeling it as typical—or even as necessary—you can support your students as they struggle through the writing process.

Finally, you may wish to talk to your students about their writing habits. Where do they write? When do they write? How much time are they giving the process? Have a frank conversation about what it means to write, and then hold your students to high standards. Show them that papers done at the last minute rob both reader and writer of an enjoyable experience.

For materials on composing that you can share with your students, see Writing: Considering Structure and Organization.

REVISION

As we noted above, revising a paper is, for some students, even more difficult than writing it. Substantive revision requires that students re-envision their papers, trying to understand how readers are understanding (or misunderstanding) them.

For first-year writers, successful revision requires a solid understanding of the academic audience. The problem is, they have only recently joined this community and don't quite understand how knowledge is created and communicated here. Talk with your students about the expectations of the academic audience and the practices of scholarship—including the particular expectations and conventions of your discipline.

Most first-year students could also benefit from a discussion of general reader expectations. Consider: Why do paragraphs require topic sentences? Because readers expect them. Where do they expect to find them? Generally at or near the beginning of a paragraph, though this depends on the purpose and structure of the paragraph. When would you put the topic sentence somewhere other than the beginning of the paragraph? When you're using a paragraph not to support a claim but to lead a reader to it; in this case, the topic sentence might come at the end of the paragraph. But regardless of where you put it, a topic sentence is generally required in order to state, implicitly or explicitly, the paragraph's main idea. Why? Again, because readers expect it. Can this expectation be violated? Sure. But you need to craft the paragraph exceptionally well if you're going to violate your reader's expectations.

Understanding readers' expectations can also help students to revise their style. For instance, readers expect to find the main idea of a sentence in the main clause. If you've placed it elsewhere, the reader will have to work to figure out what you're trying to say. Indeed, many of the problems in a paper can be worked out if students spend more time considering readers' expectations regarding style. For a full discussion of this matter, see Teaching Style.

For materials on revision that you can share with your students, see Revision: Cultivating A Critical Eye.

FACILITATING THE WRITING PROCESS

As we've seen, your primary task with student writers is to enter their writing process at various points, assess strengths and weakness, make suggestions for improvement, and monitor progress. There are several moments when you can enter your students' writing processes. You can, for instance, ask students to generate good academic questions about a text, then conduct a writing workshop, discussing how they might be improved. Or you might ask students to submit their thesis sentences—or their introductions and outlines—and then workshop these in class. You can ask students to exchange drafts of their papers—either in class or on Canvas—and teach them how to respond productively to one another's writing. You can meet with students in individual or group conferences to raise questions about their papers and offer suggestions for improvement. And of course you can respond with written comments that facilitate substantive revisions.