

I've been having trouble with Amy Schwarts, too. I can't tell if this note I found attached to her last paper is honest or not:

I cant writ to well. And spell. But I love you very much as a techer. I really do. I honestly want to feel you up.

Amy's a nice girl and even if she is sincere and honest (I think there is a certain attractive force in that last sentence of hers), what am I to do? I was the one who originally encouraged such honesty by revealing in class the lust I once had for my grandmother. And besides, I love little fresh, lovable Amy too, especially her little cheeks and the way she swishes her little tennis shoes — but how can I make the love I have for her clear in its entire, cerebral sense when she is just so basic? How can I get her to hear what Dale Carnegie calls my own "honest, sincere appreciation" (38)?

And I've begun to worry about Alan Smithers, who wrote the following:

I love to fondle and caress the toilet handle, heavy metal, chromalized to polished smoothness. I feel a beautiful urge to release my cares and fears, sensing them gurgle down the drain, down the drain, down the drain. Glug. Glug. Ah! what sweet release!

I asked him, "Why did you choose such an off-the-wall subject?" I told him that I couldn't imagine taking him seriously, especially since the assignment was to write a comparison/contrast paper on two people especially important to him. And he said, "You have no right to talk to me that way. I have a sincere, honest interest in plumbing, and your assignment sucked." I gave him an A for what I took to be his sincere, cruelly honest lyrical treatment of the movement of the flusher arm and flapper ball. I was, in fact, deeply moved and I said so. But since that time, I've had misgivings. I don't know if I really heard that cruelly honest treatment or whether I just *wanted* to hear it. I don't know if he actually fondled that handle or not. I don't know if he really stripped himself down before me and that toilet. I don't really know the force of his flush.

The real problem is becoming much more clear to me: I no longer know when my students are really being honest; I can't hear an honest voice. Susan Miller tells me:

The power of good writing is most often the surprising combination of a need to write in a particular situation, the use of a standard form, and a personalization of that form by allowing it to convey your most honest insights. (32)

and Rise Axelrod and Charles Cooper tell me that "Readers know an honest voice, and they applaud it" (37). And Roger Garrison tells me, "I'll recognize an honest communicator behind the words" (6). And what I want to know is *how do I learn to see with the piercing clarity of Donald Murray and Susan Miller and Rise B. Axelrod and Charles Cooper and Roger Garrison?* I, too, want to know when those little folk out there in my classroom are just egging me on, making me react for no reason at all, giving me dishonesty wrapped up like a fat little honest bouncing baby. I don't want to get flattened again against the blackboard and have to admit that I don't know beans about honesty as my drool flows freely into the chalk tray.

Lacking any innate gift of recognition and feeling despair rapidly creeping over my pedagogy, I've begun experimenting with mechanical means to improve my abilities as a true reader. I hope I am on the right track. A friend of mine has designed an electrical test and I have high hopes that my dean will give me per-

mission in the near future to require electrode implantations in all in-coming freshmen. (My friend suggests that if he doesn't give his permission, I might only need them to shave patches of their scalps.) In the meantime, I will teach my classes in the nude next semester and require all my students to read Carl Rogers. I don't honestly know whether true readers would find much excitement in such plans, but I don't have much time and right now, I'll try anything before I abandon ship.

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## Teaching Creative Writing: An Emphasis on Preparation

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Can creative writing be taught more effectively if specific methods of preparation are stressed in the classroom?<sup>1</sup> If, as Janice Lauer has suggested, psychologists have begun to establish the general procedures by which an original work is produced (396-97), could creative writing teachers adapt these for use in their own classrooms? Are there, in fact, any applicable principles of creativity that can be taught? Or should teachers of creative writing leave studies of the creative process to the psychologists, as Ann Berthoff has suggested (238-40), shunning any methodology of creativity as too mechanical to produce any worthwhile piece of fiction or poetry?

Creative writing teachers seem to take the latter viewpoint. Over half of those interviewed in a 1972 book called *Craft So Hard to Learn: Conversations with Poets and Novelists About the Teaching of Writing* maintain that creative writing teachers should teach critical, analytical reading of already published works.<sup>2</sup> Two state categorically that writing cannot really be taught (43, 68), perhaps in silent deference to Berthoff's contention that interference in this area would endanger the writer's chances for producing a worthwhile original work.

Thus, at a time when lower level composition courses are increasingly process-oriented and devoted to teaching students rhetorical mechanisms to generate, focus, and organize their ideas, creative writing courses tend to stress final products only. Class time is devoted first to a study of the final products of published writers, and then to the final products of class members. The processes by which creative writing students initially

develop their ideas and assemble them into these final products are largely ignored.

Studies done by several modern rhetoricians and psychologists,<sup>3</sup> on the other hand, suggest that creative writing students could benefit from instruction in specific techniques of preparation or invention which they would use, well in advance of writing their manuscripts, to develop and focus their own ideas. Although these researchers acknowledge that any original written or other work must undergo a careful evaluation after completion, they contend that those who manage to do original and ultimately professional quality work usually put substantial effort and perhaps the bulk of their ingenuity into their earliest thoughts of how to proceed. They believe, in contrast to the creative writing teachers, that the value of the work depends more heavily on the amount of effort put to bear on this initial phase of the creative process than it does on revisions or rewrites which may take place after completion and critical evaluation.

A careful consideration of these studies brings out four significant elements of the preparation process that these researchers see as crucial to the value of the final written work. Some or all of these could be adapted to the creative writing classroom.

The first of these four elements is the need on the writer's part to recognize that the emotions play a major part in creative writing. What seems particularly significant is the researchers' general agreement on the presence of a strong emotional element in the earliest phase of the creative process and on its unparalleled usefulness in generating original thought. For example, rhetorician Linda Flower and psychologist John R. Hayes found from a study of the writing processes of good vs. poor writers that the writer's desire to affect his or her audience was an important catalyst for new ideas. The better writers envisioned more complex audiences as they prepared to write; they attributed feelings, attitudes, likes, and dislikes to the members of their audiences, actually complicating the writing problem for themselves. Yet, as Flower and Hayes discovered, those who showed more concern for their audiences produced better quality writing. They note that "one of the most powerful strategies we saw for producing new ideas throughout the composing process was planning what one wanted to do to or for one's reader" (27).

It is true that many creative writers have claimed to be unconcerned with audience response, insisting that they write only for themselves. However, this is not necessarily a contradiction of Flower and Hayes' findings. In the act of writing, a person communicates a message, even if the message is a message to him- or herself. Thus, a writer concerned only about his or her own feelings, attitudes, likes, and dislikes can still be showing a concern for audience, even though it is only an audience of one.

Rhetoricians Richard E. Young, Alton L. Becker, and Kenneth L. Pike pick up the theme of emotional tension when they suggest that the source of the writer's inspiration is probably his personal uneasiness about something in his world. They theorize that the writer may be intrigued—or dismayed—by one of the following: a paradoxical fact, a situation incompatible with his or her values, two respected authorities who oppose each other, a strongly held theory he or she finds inadequate, or a clash of two sets of values that he or she respects. They maintain that mathematicians, poets, artists, and philosophers agree that the process of inquiry starts with this troubled or uneasy feeling. "If the uneasiness that grows out of one of these inconsistencies is insistent enough," write Young, Becker, and Pike, "a person seeks an explicit conscious understanding of the problem and a reconciliation of the uneasiness" (72-73).

Researchers Jacob W. Getzels and Mihalyi Csikszentmihalyi, who made a study of the preparation processes of art students at the School of Art Institute in Chicago, also discovered that those who produced better quality still life drawings indicated that personal problems were their source of inspiration. They, too, suggest that the artist's inner state must include a feeling of tension or uneasiness over some significant human experience. If no personal feelings are involved, they find, the objects in the drawing tend to remain lifeless and uninteresting, even if the drawing is technically well executed (125, 138-55).

Finally, in a 1961 book on synectics, which details methods of expanding creative output in American industry, author William J. J. Gordon claims that the emotions are more valuable than the intellect in generating new ideas and that the emotional and irrational elements of psychological thought processes "can and must be understood" in order to enhance problem solving and the creative process (6).

In terms of applying this information to the creative writing classroom, creative writing teachers could begin by acknowledging, first to themselves, and then to their students through classroom discussion, that the students will most likely be choosing a subject they feel strongly about to work with in their writing. The teacher might at this stage use brainstorming techniques, as suggested by Hayes, or freewriting exercises in which each student strives to generate ideas in one or more areas of interest. Hayes' point that the individual must learn to turn off his or her "internal editor" in order to initially generate ideas seems pertinent here, as well as his comment that a permissive atmosphere is helpful (239). At this point, students would be free to write what they feel without worrying about making sense of it.

Interestingly enough, the second important element of the preparation process, as envisioned by these researchers, is in direct conflict with the first. The researchers agree that the strong emotional element must ultimately be controlled and that this can best be done by focussing on a specific problem or question that is to be the subject of the work.

Flower and Hayes see "the act of finding or defining the problem to be 'solved'" (22) as the most crucial part of the writer's process of making meaning. They maintain that this explains why different writers produce vastly different responses to the same assignment; each presents the rhetorical problem to himself in a different way. "Because people only solve the problems they give themselves," they write, "the act of representing the problem has a dramatic impact on performance" (23).

From their study of student artists, Getzels and Csikszentmihalyi found that those who spent more time on problem finding activities (that is, took longer to select objects, arrange them, select paper, etc.) produced still life drawings that were judged higher in originality and in aesthetic value (125-28). They concluded that "time spent working on the drawing does not significantly increase its worth, but time spent on finding and formulating the problem does. The student who comes to the situation with a ready-made or 'canned' problem is less likely to produce a drawing that will be rated original" (128).

Young, Becker, and Pike agree, stressing that searching for a specific question is an excellent way of controlling the emotions. They maintain that there are techniques for moving from an initial amorphous feeling of unease to a well-stated unknown. For instance, one could classify and reclassify the question in order to shed light on it. Is it a question of fact? Of process? Of relationships? A value question? A question of causation and probability? Of consistency? Of policy? It would be up to the writers to

ask themselves these questions about their own problems as a way of gaining a deeper understanding of them (94).

Young, Becker, and Pike also outline the characteristics of a well-stated question: it should make no careless assumptions about the solution which close off the possibility of other solutions; it should be oriented toward data rather than toward solutions; it should be clear and precise; and, specifically in terms of language, it should avoid vague and emotionally powerful words (96).

In addition, these rhetoricians advise that unsolvable problems should be avoided, and that the writer can profit by recognizing that there are two worlds of problems. One is the external world, comprised of the physical and social environment, and the other is the internal world, involving personal concepts and ideas (97).

Young, Becker, and Pike do not specify what level of writing students these techniques would benefit the most; in fact, modern rhetoric in general often seems to focus on the problem of teaching composition skills to freshman writers. Yet, I would suggest that the techniques described here would be more useful for an upper level student who has already demonstrated some sophistication in language and composition skills, and who now wants to produce an original work, perhaps a short story. Young, Becker, and Pike's discussion of different types of problems could easily lend itself to the short story writer's development of plot; at least the type of conflict involved would be clarified, suggesting a focus for the final work.

In terms of specific application to the creative writing classroom, teachers could at this point ask their students to specify five questions within their chosen area of interest. Of these five questions, the student would choose one to grapple with. The teacher would demonstrate how to examine a sample question, state it in different ways, determine its distinctive features, break it down into parts, and rebuild it again. The student would be encouraged to work and rework the question until satisfied with it as the focus for this particular piece of writing. Even then, he or she would be free to change it at any time.

The third element of preparation stressed by nearly all of the rhetoricians and psychologists, and mentioned by two of the creative writing teachers as well, is the importance of research. Creative writers, like any other creative problem solvers, must have a knowledge base to draw from when they write. If a writer is drawing upon personal experiences, he or she must examine those experiences closely, perhaps through use of the heuristics suggested by several of the rhetoricians.

For example, Young, Becker, and Pike's method requires writers to consciously analyze their problem by asking systematic questions about it, thus creating their own heuristic as an aid to generating new information. The questions must examine the problem from many different perspectives; their particular method of questioning sees the problem first as a particle (a separate unit), then as a wave (a changing unit among other units), and finally as a field (a unit with many subsystems) (123-27). This method, though complex, could be an aid to fleshing out details about a potential character in a short story, possibly generating such questions as the following: Who is the man if seen separately? (What are his physical attributes?) Who is the man if seen as part of a group to which he belongs? What are the internal feelings, attitudes, and goals which motivate the man? Even if this particular method is not applicable to all problems a writer faces, the principle of consciously stimulating one's intellect by searching out information could be quite helpful.

Writing teachers Cynthia L. Selfe and Sue Rodi, co-authors of "An Invention Heuristic for Expressive Writing," have devised a heuristic which aims to help students learn about personal identity through writing. This heuristic involves questions of self-definition in various areas, questions of social definition, and questions of environmental definition. According to the authors, this heuristic helps give structure to a student's remembered experience, and encourages him or her to remember the experience in as much detail as possible, thereby encouraging self-discovery through the writing (169-70). They claim that the results of using the heuristic have been improved writing, including "some very insightful writing that is well worth reading by others" (172).

Since a college student's fiction or poetry will probably deal to some extent with personal experience, an attempt to structure that experience through questions before beginning to write could be helpful. Or, sets of questions which do not deal so extensively with the self could be added. In this way, students could develop a knowledge base which prepares them for what they want to write.

Rhetorician Richard L. Larson also believes that writing teachers should force their students to make a detailed examination of personal experiences "through a process of systematic questioning — questioning which students engage in mostly by themselves, rather than questioning conducted by the teacher" (128). Larson advises that the teacher demonstrate techniques of systematic questioning, but that the students must learn to apply these techniques to their own material if their writing is to improve. A few examples of the questions Larson suggests, aimed at examining a single event, are the following:

Exactly what happened? (Tell the precise sequence: who? what? when? how? why? Who did what to whom? Why? What did what to what? how?)

What were the circumstances in which the event occurred?

What did they contribute to its happening?

How was the event like or unlike similar events?

What were its causes?

What were its consequences? (132)

It seems reasonable for a creative writing teacher to demand that students be able to answer questions such as these about events they want to discuss in their writing. Further, the students could be asked to make their own heuristic of questions about the problem, carefully designing the questions to look at it from as many perspectives as possible. Then, in order to generate material for the final writing, they could be asked to write down any details, facts, situations, or other information which might apply to the problem. Also, they could be asked to look up any information needed to supplement their first-hand knowledge of the problem.

Finally, the ability to work with analogy emerges as the fourth important element in the preparation phase of the creative process. Gordon's synectics techniques (36-56) are based on learning to work with different kinds of analogy; several of these could easily be used as pre-writing exercises. For example, use of *Personal Analogy*, which involves identifying with one of the elements of the problem, could lend itself to character development if the student writer were required to write something from the point of view of each character as a pre-writing exercise. Also, *Symbolic Analogy*, which focusses on developing a visual image for the problem, could be used to alert student writers to the pos-

sibility of using symbolism to strengthen their representation of their particular problem in writing. As an exercise, students might be asked to decide on a symbol expressing in shorthand terms each element of their story or poem. Perhaps the setting gives the sense of a cage; perhaps a character could be symbolized as a bird. As they write, naturally, the students would be free to use or to discard any of these ideas.

It seems clear that there are, in fact, pre-writing exercises and intellect-stimulating activities which the creative writing teacher could use in the classroom to help students prepare for what they want to write. Yet the question remains: should creative writing teachers attempt to teach their students specific ways to generate and mold their ideas before they begin to write the final work? Will the student's and teacher's conscious attention to various elements in the process of preparation really stimulate better results from the creative writing student? Or should the creative writing teacher continue to stress critical reading skills and an appreciation of the literary techniques of professional writers, leaving the students to develop their ideas on their own and devoting class time primarily to evaluating, editing, and critiquing the students' finished works?

Although the available literature on the use of preparation procedures does not prove that teaching them will elicit better quality and more original writing, it does indicate that, in some cases, more preparation has led to better results. Possibly beginning with openly emotional freewriting and progressing to a search for a specific question to focus on, and then to a search for useful details, information, and analogies, preparation procedures could provide creative writing students with a concrete place to start. They could encourage them to work with their ideas in a productive way, developing their material as much as possible before they place themselves under the pressure of writing the final product.

A logical synthesis of the research being done on both creativity in general and on writing processes in particular seems to point toward a re-vamping of teaching methods in creative writing courses. Surely, a student who has been taught a complete program of preparation processes for original writing stands a far greater chance of success than the one who has only been taught to appreciate the work of others. The processes themselves are open to interpretation by individual teachers, who could choose the pre-writing exercises they feel are most useful to each class, have each student work on applying these to his or her own area of interest, and have each assemble the exercises into a kind of portfolio of resources to be used in planning the final written work.

Flexibility should probably be stressed here. If the students ultimately choose to reject the material they have generated in the preparation exercises, they should be free to do so. That is, the specific focus or question could be changed at any time, and various details and information used or discarded as the student

chooses. After the work is completed, evaluation and criticism by teacher and peers could still take place.

As Getzels and Csikszentmihalyi pointed out, very few students will ultimately produce outstanding work that is universally acclaimed (182). At the same time, however, there may well be numerous upper level writing students who could be helped to structure their own interesting perceptions of contemporary life into poetry or fiction that is worth reading, and teaching them to do more extensive preparation before writing may be a significant help.

#### Notes

<sup>1</sup>This paper has benefited from readings of earlier drafts by Walter S. Minot.

<sup>2</sup>On this point see Garrett, pp. 12-13, 25, 36-37, 54-55, and 68.

<sup>3</sup>See Flower and Hayes (21-23), Getzels and Csikszentmihalyi (81-82 and 125-129), Gordon (46 and 34-56), Hayes (226-231 and 237-240), Larson (127-128), Selfe and Rodi (169 and 172), and Young, Becker and Pike (90-94 and 119).

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