

Our effectiveness as teachers of writing in college is strongly influenced by the attitudes toward writing that students have developed in high-school; this is especially true for those students who do not want to take one more English class. By describing their previous experience and practice of writing, students reveal their self-image and self-esteem as writers and where they most need our guidance and encouragement. Because such essential information takes time to discover, I find that my students' first reflective essay provides an initial sense of my students that I can deepen through class meetings and in conferences.

This introductory essay provides the teacher with basic knowledge for designing the course and reveals to the students the assumptions, values and attitudes that they bring to college writing. When we ask students to reflect on the high-school writing curriculum as they have experienced it, we communicate to them not only an interest in their background as writers, but also a respect for the work of their former teachers. Whether or not we choose to recognize and to value the many years of previous writing instruction that teachers have given to our students, this instruction will influence strongly how our own teaching is received and how fully it is incorporated into what these writers already know and believe about writing. Our offer of one more writing course is most successful when we relate our pedagogy to what students have been taught in grades k-12 and when we discover ways to relate new knowledge to old. Then students can regard college composition as an integral and continuous part of their education and not just the last required writing class.

NOTES

¹My thanks to Richard Larson, former editor of *College Composition and Communication*, for encouraging me to stay focused on the "curriculum in writing" that students have experienced in relation to our more public statements about the writing curriculum.

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RE-UNITING THE ARTS OF LANGUAGE: ASSIGNMENTS IN THE BASIC WRITING CLASS

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"It does seem clear that many students will fail to write as well as they can when confronted with vague and confusing topics or topics that are ill suited to their age, capacity, or background" (White 100). E. M. White's comment sounds like common sense, but authorities disagree on what makes a clear topic and how to be sure it is suitable for the students who will write it. Writing assignment research and theory offer conflicting advice and concern themselves with the written assignment rather than the preparation leading up to it. In other words, they tend to be more concerned with the written product as it relates to the teacher's or tester's requirements than with the preliminary steps students follow in producing the final product. If this sounds like the argument we thought was no longer in debate—product versus process—the researchers and theorists usually have not confronted that possibility.

In the case of Basic Writers (B.W.), confusion of product and process can be a disaster, but there is a glimmer of hope because for Basic Writers, especially, teachers can look to the whole language approach for guidance in assignment preparation. Elementary teachers are, perhaps, more familiar with the whole language approach than are those of us at the college level. Those teachers understand this teaching strategy to imply that the language arts—reading, writing, speaking, and listening—are integrated in each assignment. College teachers are beginning to view this approach as using the "arts of language" (Lunsford, 1988).

Unlike our elementary school colleagues, we at the college level have often ignored the possible importance of integrating the arts of language and have instead concentrated on two central issues about appropriate writing assignments. One aspect of debate about assignments centers on whether teachers should provide students with all the variables in the writing situation, or whether they should give a minimum amount of information, allowing the students to develop their own rhetorical situations. One could make the argument that the first group of theorists is discussing writing assignments while the researchers are examining writing tests. However, White believes the same concerns are present whether the writing is a test with time restrictions or an out-of-class assignment. He concludes, "A carefully designed writing topic will help students write their best and find that writing more rewarding, whatever the nature of the assignment" (101). Neither White nor the other researchers and theorists address the critical question of preparation leading to the assignment.

And yet, what is done before the final draft of the assignment is actually written is especially crucial because during the preliminary stages teachers are helping students to build a writing schema to call on in the written product. It is this schema that will be developed by an approach utilizing all the arts of language for each assignment.

Cognitive Structures

A schema, a type of cognitive map, is a mental representation. For an essay, the schema may be as general as an introduction,

body, and conclusion, or it may be as specific as the structure of effective argumentation. Dorothy Grant Hennings, writing for elementary teachers, explained that "schema theory holds that the understandings a child brings to the reading of a selection are as important to comprehension as are the actual words of the written text. The child, or any reader [or writer] for that matter, has a fund of knowledge through which he or she filters messages. This knowledge is stored as cognitive frameworks that learning theorists call schemata. Schemata include conceptions of how written content is structured as well as general understanding of a topic" (15). James Squire, also, addressed schemata when he declared, "A critical factor in shaping the quality of both composing [writing] and comprehending [reading] is the prior knowledge the pupil brings to reading and writing" (586). He further explained prior knowledge as a "reader's schemata—the sum total of his or her world knowledge and skill in retrieving these attitudes and ideas . . ." (586).

Basic Writers' Essays

One particular schema that Basic Writers lack is the ability to move from general to specific and back again. Shaughnessy, for example, declared, "The problem in most BW papers lies in the absence of movement between abstract and concrete statements. Papers tend to contain either cases or generalizations but not both" (240). Bartholomae mentioned this same problem in a list of Basic Writer characteristics, presented in a 1979 article.

The Arts of Language

When students do not bring a common experience or a writing schema to an assignment, the teacher can provide one through assignments that employ all of the arts of language. Basic Writing authorities, such as Andrea Lunsford, have called for a reunion of the arts of language. By this they mean, the B.W. class should develop students' reading, listening, speaking and writing skills, and current research suggests that developing one may improve the others. In one language area—reading and writing—research has investigated the principle that those skills learned in one language art will transfer to another. For example, Stotsky's 1983 meta-analysis of reading/writing research led her to conclude, "To summarize briefly, the correlational studies show almost consistently that better writers tend to be better readers (of their own writing as well as other reading material), that better writers tend to read more than poorer writers, and that better readers tend to produce more syntactically mature writing than poorer readers" (636). Donald Graves has voiced the same idea: "Writing contributes to reading because writing is the making of reading. . . . Research has tied reading comprehension to the ability of students to combine sentences in writing. The ability to revise writing for greater power and economy is one of the higher forms of reading" (8). A similar connection between two language arts is explained by speaking/writing theorists such as Cooper and Odell: "Although speech and writing constitute different modes of communication and make different demands on a communicator, there is some reason to think that the act of speaking may directly assist the act of writing" (103).

In their recent text, *Facts, Artifacts, and Counterfactuals*, Bartholomae and Petrosky discuss a course that combines reading and writing and uses an assignment sequence reminiscent of William Coles. They do not specifically discuss combining all the arts of language, but much of what they describe does in fact employ all of them. At one point, the authors also acknowledge that the approach is not easy especially when the instructor does not provide all the input during class discussion. For the vast number of

college writing instructors, Bartholomae and Petrosky's book, like my own approach, is a new one, and they are frequently unfamiliar with the rationale for believing that sequencing and using all the arts of language will work.

The underlying principal that connects the arts of language is cognition. By improving one art, we are actually building a schema the student may access through other arts of language. Merlin Wittrock explains, "Good reading, like good writing, involves generative cognitive processes that create meaning by building relations between the text and what we know, believe, and experience. The meaning is not only on the page, nor only in our memories. When we read, we generate meaning by relating parts of the text to one another and to our memories and our knowledge" (600).

Assignment Design

In order to teach the schema for moving from general to specific, BW teachers need to design assignments that call on all the language arts. More specifically, building speaking, reading, listening, and writing into an assignment enhances a student's chances of developing the general-to-specific schema because each art of language depends on the general-to-specific schema to achieve meaning.

In a recent article in the *Journal of Basic Writing*, Andrea Lunsford addressed some of these same concerns. She called for six features that represent the best basic writing assignments:

1. They relate speaking, reading, listening, and writing.
2. They encourage collaboration.
3. They should encourage risk-taking and meaning-making.
4. They teach usage conventions and deal with error in the context of the student's own writing.
5. They provide continuous practice in perceiving, inferring, abstracting, and generalizing.
6. They engage students in choosing topics for discussion and for writing. (96-97)

One of my assignments, given early in the semester and involving a typical Basic Writing topic, uses the four language arts Lunsford called for in her first point. The assignment asks students to explain one aspect of the character of someone they know well, illustrating with at least two short narratives. While the topic is typical, the preliminary steps are unique in the way they combine the language arts. Students begin a rough draft in their journals—the writing component of the language arts continuum—then they describe their draft to a classmate. During this speaking component, the audience or classmate is encouraged to ask questions and to press for details. The writer makes notes during the conversation so that he or she can add details to the draft. This is the listening component. Then, for the reading area, students are provided with a student written draft of this same assignment. After reading it, they are asked to explain what the writer used for details. During this portion, I float around the classroom, dropping into and out of pair discussions while pressing students to question and reinforcing insightful comments. Now, they are ready to re-write their drafts. Sometimes, I include conferences at this point in the drafting as another way of reinforcing the speaking-writing component since Basic Writers are frequently oralists and so are likely to respond in that medium. In each step, students are either generating or discovering generalizations and specifics.

My early assignment meets four of Lunsford's criteria; it does not encourage risk-taking or topic choosing. But, then, it is designed as the second assignment of the semester. Later ones attack these two criteria, as well as the other four. For example, mid-way through the semester, I ask students to write about a time they were stereotyped or to stereotype a group and then show how the stereotype is not always true by using specifics about someone who does not fit that stereotype. One student wrote about policemen: she said they were violent, uncaring, and prone to seek danger. In her refutation, she used examples of her uncle and friends who do not demonstrate those characteristics, but in fact, disapprove of violence, demonstrate concern beyond that expected, and avoid danger unless compelled to deal with a dangerous person or situation. Unlike the earlier assignment, this one requires some risk-taking and meaning-making because students must decide to take a stand that may not be popular with other students and to reveal some of their own prejudices. In addition, each step of the preparation fulfills Lunsford's criteria: each relates the language arts, uses collaboration, deals with grammar in the context of the assignment, provides practice in inferring and generalizing, and engages students in discussion. In particular, the preliminary steps unite the language arts. Again, students read previous student papers and professional essays, discuss their essays in editing groups, listen and take notes on peers' advice, and read each other's essays looking for specifics and generalities.

Building on these two and other assignments, my students finish the semester with their most difficult assignment as they engage in an analysis of the audience for a magazine they choose. This assignment requires them to discover the specifics and determine what underlying generalization they support. For example, they must decide if the magazine editors believe that the audience for their publication is primarily black or white, young or middle aged, poor or middle class. Brighter students will even develop generalizations on a higher cognitive level by deciding what ideals or beliefs the editors think their audiences hold. This assignment, too, meets Lunsford's criteria by utilizing the same approaches as the earlier ones.

These assignments, then, employ all of the language arts in an effort to develop students' general to specific schema. Students demonstrate that they have mastered the schema in the first assignment when their essays contain a thesis labeling the character aspect and developing it with two short narratives. Those who are more proficient will also usually add generalizations to introduce each story and a generalization as a conclusion. Similarly, they demonstrate the ability to move from general to specific and back again in the other assignments by forming generalizations and using specifics to support them.

Summary

Vital to proficient writing, the ability to move from general to specific and back again is one of the writing schemas that Basic Writers lack. Teachers who carefully compose Basic Writing assignments can help students develop the ability to move from general to specific. One way to develop this schema is through employing all the arts of language in each assignment. Rather than concentrate on the concern expressed by researchers and theorists about the amount of information contained in an assignment, the Basic Writing teacher needs to provide activities that develop a common schema for students to call on regardless of the final assignment's information level.

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READING FOR PLEASURE: THE RESEARCH PAPER RECONSIDERED

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Let's talk about the research paper—granted, a dispiriting proposal. But although it bores everybody damn near to death, a great many college courses, certainly every composition class, have A RESEARCH PAPER (business communication texts, depressingly, often call it THE LONG REPORT) embedded in them like stone.

And we all hate it.

Students hate it because they believe they've been writing research papers half their lives and already know how, but they also hate it because they don't believe they *can* make valuable judgments about what they read: it's all been said, and anyway, the teacher already knows more than they can possibly dredge up. So they naturally dread the prospect of having to restate what they feel can't be said any better way.

We teachers hate it, first, because students resent it and become surly at its approach. We hate it because our students (cornered by us) "choose" such global topics that the data *is* too difficult for them to master. Too difficult, but at the same time,