PHILLIPS EXETER ACADEMY
— A WRITING PROGRAM

The following excerpt is from an essay explaining, in full, the Phillips Exeter Academy English program which has had remarkable success in helping high school age students to write well. The entire article will be published in Independent Schools in the February issue.

The members of the Phillips Exeter Academy English department believe in writing with a certain mystical awe. Writing is more than a practical tool to convey information useful in self-promotion or for realizing professional status. It is epistemology, ontology, and teleology. It is logic, rhetoric, and poetics. Writing has emerged as the center of the English curriculum as the logical consequence of a personal, seminar system of learning. In any school where teacher loads can be held under sixty students, conditions are ideal for a writing program to flourish; to do less, to fail to center a curriculum in writing with thirteen students in a class, is to betray the essential needs of developing adolescents.

Writing is composing, and composing is a decision making process of great complexity even on the simplest level. It is more than grammar or spelling or punctuation. It is above all a process of thinking, feeling, ordering, organizing. It entails an inner sense of revision, a mysterious power in all students that continues to amaze teachers of writing who permit and encourage it to operate. Writing is also a process of discovery, a mode of knowing. Students often find out what they really know by being forced to write; ideally they do not understand any content until they have written it. It is then, after a

(Continued on page 12)
first draft, after the writer discovers what he really wants to say, that the shaping toward form and correctness begins.

Just as reading is several times a more active learning tool than watching TV, so writing several times more effective than reading. What one reads has already been ordered, pre-selected, pre-evaluated. When the student writes, he must do the ordering, clarify the relationship of ideas and the relative importance of evidence and arguments; he must select an effective rhetorical strategy, choose the words for clarity, precision, and tone, select appropriately subordinate structures to mirror subordinate content. To select, order, shape, and correct the multiplicity of variables in any piece of writing requires the mind to function integrally and differentially.

One could argue that writing is an excellent preparation for life. Decision making is certainly a transferable skill if not a moral quality. Composition entails risks of error at every turn. The ability to acknowledge one's errors and accept the responsibility for correcting them produces maturity. And the frequent confrontation with that blank page—often daily—probably produces more moral courage than all the playing fields of Eton or Exeter.

The writing program is grounded in several general principles, some similar to those that underlie the developmental reading sequence. We expect diversity and graduated complexity in the writing produced by our students. The students write personal narratives, descriptions of people and places, fiction, drama, journalism, structural criticism, analytical, argumentative and reflective essays, obituaries, poetry, graduation speeches, letters to editors, intelligence reports, satire, character sketches, self-portraits, journals, college essays. They write from a variety of perspectives to a variety of audiences as they explore the voices that emerge within and as they begin to sense the importance of the expanding world beyond home and family. In each course we try to achieve a balance between the teacher's insistence that the student write about new ideas, using different techniques, and the student's right to explore his own subject matter and discover his own voice, perspective, or structure. Even when a student is directed to experiment with a technique, the content is his.

There are three stages of emphasis for a four-year student. Experiential writing dominates the first three semesters. Students write about the world around them—the given world of family, friends, school—in several modes such as narratives, descriptions, interior and dramatic monologues, and dialogue. Though students are asked to write frequently—especially in class—about the reading, the majority of papers are derived from personal experience so that the students can develop self-confidence as authors. Each student becomes an expert, writing as a professional to the teacher and fellow students rather than as a hesitant amateur, as often occurs when students are required to write exclusively about a narrow range of literary topics they neither fully understand nor care about for a teacher who has studied the material for several years in college and graduate school. A sense of authorship develops more effectively when the writer has leverage on the reader.

During the middle semesters the emphasis is placed upon moving the student from participant-writer to observer-writer, from self-awareness to audience awareness. It is during these semesters that the student learns the role of the writer as mediator, arbiter, and guide. We encourage students to fictionalize more objectively, to use "I" as a device of fiction rather than simply as an expression of self. Students experiment with different voices. They are required to reach beyond personal experience and explore or investigate other people's worlds and interests. This stage of writer development corresponds to the emergence in many students of a second self with whom each holds private, often critical discourse. This is a complex and critical stage of growth that is often simplistic, characterized solely in terms of the refinement of "cognitive" skills. It is much more complicated than that. We require the students, however, to write papers in which the skills of explanation and analysis are balanced with skills of narration, description, and characterization. The reporter-at-large, the family heritage paper, multiple perspective fiction, intelligence or reconnaissance reports, college entrance essays, third person self-evaluations, and policy statements or editorials are all representative assignments during the tenth and eleventh grades.

In the latter half of the eleventh grade and throughout the senior year the emphasis shifts to the intellectual. Students write longer analytical and interpretive papers. In fiction, we expect students to handle anonymous narration and more complex narrative time schemes. We also focus upon maturity of style, but the earlier skills are not abandoned. Students still write personal narratives and poetry. Sensitivity to detail, perception, and convincing dialogue are still important; they have not been superseded by cognitive skills as though literary criticism were some higher form of expression. No one in his right mind thinks that the critical essay is superior to the short story as a literary form. We defer the intellectual emphasis for two principal reasons. Beginning writers develop a surer sense of who they are as authors by writing initially about personal experience. Secondly, after several semesters of reading and classroom discussions of literature, the students develop greater self-confidence as well as an appropriate vocabulary to handle more abstract and intellectualized papers. Sophisticated cognitive skills seem to develop later than experi-
ential skills with most students.

Through the sequence just described, we attempt to integrate the reading and the writing. Students are assigned to write a paper using a specific technique (an I-witness point-of-view or the present tense, for example) after the class discussion of its use in a novel or short story. More often than not the free papers are inspired by a book or a class discussion. A novel such as Native Son might provoke several completely different kinds of papers in any one class: an essay on rats or the color white, a personal narration or piece of fiction about fear, a statement about social justice, a philosophic dialogue about power, a description of a limiting or entrapping environment. It might also produce a critical assessment of the last third of the book. Writing is better when students read works similar in theme or form to what they are expected to write. The story of Bigger Thomas becomes a moving, vicarious experience for most of our students. They are better informed; their sense of fairness and social justice is deepened. They become more profoundly human, and they become better writers.

Perhaps reading is our most effective teacher of writing. Generations of great writers have testified that their own development was influenced by writers they admired. Reading books does not interfere with the development of a natural or personal voice. We do not use literature as models to be slavishly imitated. We might use fiction to inspire a poem, an essay might produce a short story, a novel, a play; any form can evoke a critical or reflective essay. If anything interferes with the growth of young people as writers it is an environment devoid of the written word—the worlds of television and careless oral language, which often produce derivative content, cliches of thought and expression, vague diction, and limited syntactic variety in student writing. Reading and writing reinforce each other as skills when the connections between them, especially on the level of craft, are clarified.

In teaching writing we believe in the “basics,” but our basic principles have only a tangential relationship to those promulgated today in the “back to basics” movement. By basics we do not mean drill in grammar with canned sentences in exercise workbooks or the memorization of grammatical nomenclature. We have not instituted remedial writing courses labeled “competence,” for we well know that competence is an issue in every paper—not an eternal condition of the soul mastered in one semester or trimester as the case may be. Syntactic, semantic, and rhetorical competence in the tenth grade can be syntactic, semantic and rhetorical failure in the twelfth grade. Because writing is perhaps the most complex of all human activities, making errors goes with the territory. Errors gradually disappear only over a long period of constant and frequent correction.

Many of the following basic practices and attitudes that permit our students to become writers are logical extensions of seminar teaching. Most have been validated by recent research.

1. Students learn to write by writing, frequently, in various modes, and to a variety of audiences. The teacher may use supplemental aids such as diagnostic grammar tests, grammar texts, workbooks, vocabulary sheets, or sentence combining exercises but not to the extent that any of these aids becomes a substitute for student writing.

2. Students are encouraged to write about their own experience. They choose to write about books, their feelings, relatives, special interests, political passions, and what they may have done last summer, which in this permissive age is one of the most interesting papers teachers read.

3. Grammar and style are taught most effectively by noting errors in the student’s own writing and by requiring the student to correct the errors. Examples of writing problems are often selected from a set of student papers, duplicated, and passed out to the class for collective consideration. Stylistically we encourage students to write economically and concretely. It is an axiom of our writing program not to teach the student what he already knows as revealed by what he is writing correctly.

4. Evaluations of student papers should be positive as well as negative, promptly returned, and open to student counter-response and eventual dialogue. Students should see noted errors as opportunities for improvement rather than as justification of a grade. Covering a paper with red marks is not always productive.

5. Students read their papers aloud in class for feedback and encouragement. The teacher should not be the sole audience for student writing. Conferences between the student and the teacher are expected, often while the student is searching for a topic, writing a paper, or doing a revision. Writing is rewriting also. The teacher’s advice is most useful while the student is making decisions rather than after.

6. Teachers of writing should practice writing and be willing to write along with their students or to share first drafts of their own compositions with students.

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