How Did You Do That?
The Secrets of Strong Writers

by Dean Smith

For more than a decade, I've been helping my students discover the processes they use when composing. I teach them that these processes are individual, flexible, and recursive, but involve some basic components, including prewriting, drafting, feedback, revision, and editing. I demonstrate my writing processes, which include choosing topics that are interesting to me, sipping a cup of coffee or tea, wandering the room to think, making lists, scratching off listed items as I write, rearranging paragraphs and ideas, and finally asking colleagues I trust to read and respond to my work.

As a writing project teacher, I've long believed that knowledge of writing processes helps students write better texts, but I had never tested this idea. I decided to perform a classroom-based research project to examine this theory. I started with this question: Does knowledge of writing processes improve the quality of written products?

The study, conducted over the course of an entire school year, was performed in a rural school district in Central Pennsylvania. I worked with approximately 120 heterogeneously grouped ninth-grade students whose reading levels spanned the entire ability continuum.

First, I asked students to write to a prompt I provided, and, after writing, to reflect on their writing processes. I then analyzed the students' reflections as well as the quality of their written products to determine whether knowledge of writing processes helped them produce better texts.

The Prompt

The following thought-provoking text — a letter written by a teacher who had been doing some soul-searching — became the initial writing prompt. My students and I defined and discussed the difficult vocabulary in the letter, and then we read it out loud together.

To whom it may concern:

I have taught in high school for ten years. During that time I have given assignments, among them, to a murderer, an evangelist, a pugilist, a thief, and an imbecile.

The murderer was a quiet little boy who sat on the front seat and regarded me with pale blue eyes; the evangelist, easily the most popular boy in the school, had the lead in the junior play; the pugilist lounged by the window and let loose at intervals with a raucous laugh that startled even the geraniums; the thief was a gay-hearted Lothario with a song on his lips; and the imbecile, a soft-eyed little animal seeking the shadows.

The murderer awaits death in the state penitentiary; the evangelist has lain for a year in a country churchyard; the pugilist lost an eye in a brawl in Hong Kong; the thief, by standing on tiptoe, can see the windows of my room from the county jail; and the once gentle-eyed little moron beats his head against the padded wall in the state asylum.

All these pupils once sat in my room, sat and looked at me gravely across worn brown desks. I must have been a great help to these pupils — I taught them the rhyming scheme of the Elizabethan sonnet and how to diagram a complex sentence.

Naomi Hohn White
Stillwater High School
Stillwater, OK

After we read the letter together, I asked my students to write a response. But there was a hitch. I also told them that, as they wrote, I wanted them to sit back and examine their own writing processes:

After reading the above letter, I would like you to respond to it in writing. When I say respond, I don't necessarily mean write a letter back. I want you to respond to it in writing as you might respond to any other piece of literature or news story or movie or incident that causes you to reflect. What does it make you think about? How does it make you feel? Your response may take any form (a journal entry, a letter, a poem, a stream-of-consciousness reaction, etc.). While you write your response, take note of the things that you do as a writer. What strategies do you use? How do you go about it? What do you notice about the way you write? On a separate piece of paper, write about how you write.

I used the letter responses to gather reflections on writing, and I later used the reflections as an inductive way to teach the writing process and as a springboard for talking about successful writing habits.
How Did You Do That? The Secrets of Strong Writers

I kept my students’ responses to the letter and their self-analyses of their writing processes until later in the year, when I had seen enough compositions to identify my stronger and weaker writers. At that point, I went back and reexamined what they had said about their own processes.

Processes of Weak Writers

When I looked at the students’ responses to White’s letter, I found that the weaker pieces of writing were short and poorly developed. They exhibited a lack of focus and/or organization, indicating little or no prewriting. Weaker pieces tended to ramble without any clear direction; some even contained random sentences copied from the letter. They also suffered from stylistic problems, such as poor word choice and sentence structure, as well as many mechanical errors that sometimes interfered with the reader’s comprehension of the piece. These problems can be seen in the following responses to White’s letter:

My respon to this is that the teacher was the fault of these people Im not sure why but that is wat I feel. The teacher must not have tought them anything.

I don’t know how to write to you or to any one about this letter but I feel like the lady that wrote it was friends with one or all of them. The lady was like a doll not to say what she meant but to write it down so that she did not hurt the people she knew but in a way she played a big part in each of there lives. It reminds me of a poem I read a long time ago about a women with a big problem and killed her self to save her self. So don’t ask me about a women with a five bad people in her class when she should be talking about her self.

The murderer was quiet little boy who sat in front seat & regarded me with pale blue eyes. the evangelist, most poular boy in school had the lead in the junior play. the pugilist lounged by the window & let loose at intervals w/ raucous laugh that strated even the geraniums. The thief was gay-hearted Lothario w/ a song on his lips. & the imbecile softeye animal seeking shadows.

Most of these underdeveloped pieces were written by students who did little, if any, prewriting. They thought very little about the topic and used no apparent strategies for generating ideas and putting those ideas into some kind of order. After I heard my students read orally and examined their performance on a standardized reading test, I noticed another connection: the better readers were also better writers, a finding that should surprise no one.

After identifying the weaker writers, based on their responses to White’s letter as well as other written work during the semester, I examined what these writers noticed about their own writing processes. Many of these students seemed to think very little about their processes, as evidenced by the brevity of their self-analyses:

I don’t write to good but when I start writing I just want to go on and on. I write to many run-on sentences. I can’t write to dang good cause I don’t know how to set it up.

When I write sentence by sentence my letter might have no order as soon as I get a idea I write it. I am writing left handed. My hand hurts after writing 3 sentences so my writing is bad then.

I write very weird. Half the time I don’t know what I write about I just write down stuff that I think of.

My writing is very sloppy. That is usualy how I write when I am writing my thoughts. I misspell a lot of words. It’s very sloppy. I think its too boring. I don’t do my paragraphs right. I some of my writing I don’t use paragraphs at all.

Based upon these and many other responses, I started to look for commonalities among my weaker writers. One of the first telltale problems I discovered was that some of my students had a very limited understanding of what writing is. Some of the weaker writers tended to think that the main purpose of writing was clear penmanship: “I write as a writer usually in cursive, because it is neater then my print.” Another student added, “I am not a very good writer. My handwriting is really bad.”

A second problem I discovered was that many students do not take care to find a quiet place to read or write. TV and other distractions may interrupt students’ concentration, resulting in a loss of continuity. One of my weaker writers claimed, “I like writing when in my bedroom watching TV before I go to bed. That’s when I’m the most relaxed and I can concentrate on what I’m doing.” On the other hand, Darcy, one of my stronger writers, pointed out that he must “go someplace quiet (probably my room). I
can’t have too many distractions, or I lose my train of thought."

A third problem: Weaker writers do not start with a specific idea or point that they want to make. Rather than beginning with a good idea, they tend to focus on the particulars of writing and lose sight of any overall purpose. “Every time I write I go word by word trying to think about what to write next,” said one student. On the other hand, stronger writers are so intent on getting their message out that they tend to skip words, leave spaces, or just draw a line if they cannot think of the right word or phrase. Once the main ideas have been sketched out, they go back and try to fill in the missing blanks.

**Processes of Strong Writers**

Just as I identified weak writers, I also identified stronger writers based on their responses to Smith’s letter, as well as other written work. Good writing tended to include several characteristics:

- a clear, consistent focus on a topic without many digressions
- more developed ideas with plenty of details
- sentence variety
- that elusive quality called “voice,” through which authors reveal a little something about themselves in their writing, and
- fewer mechanical errors that get in the way of comprehension.

Rebecca’s response and analysis, below, provide an example of strong writing. In the first part, she takes on the voice of Naomi Hohn White, the teacher who wrote the moving letter. Then Rebecca takes on the voice of one of White’s former students. Finally, she returns to the voice of White, who concludes by reminding us that we’re not just teachers of English but also teachers of children.

> If you could see the future, bad moments and all, what would you do to stop them? Sadly, the future is not ours to see. So we must do all that we can now. When I look across the sea of face in my tenth grade classroom, I can never spot the ones who will make bad choices later on in life. After teaching for more than ten years, I have learned an important lesson – if I care for and give each student the attention and love that every child deserves; if I teach them about right and wrong; then I have given them a more valuable gift then has ever been attained through sentence diagramming. I give them the gift of life. Of love. And most of all, a promising future. I just wish I had know this sooner. The journal entry below, written by one of my former students, will show you what I mean.

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Joshua Whitmore, September 18, 1998

Tomorrow is my big day. No, not the day that I graduate, the day I get married — not even the day I get my first paycheck or get promoted. Tomorrow is the day I die.

I didn’t mean to do it. Well, at the time I did, but now, oh! how I regret it! Yet, the fact remains — I am a murderer.

I don’t want to die. I’m afraid to die. Oh, God, let me live one more day of freedom! What does it feel like when you die? Where do you go? I wish someone — anyone, would tell me! Or could tell me. But no. No one cares about the loner. No one pays attention.
Maybe that's why I went so far. For attention. And now, I hate myself for it. This is certainly not the kind of attention I once wished for.

If only someone had told me when I was young. Told me about choices — and consequences. All that time spent in school, learning about proper grammar and stuff — what's it to me now? If even just one person had helped me, maybe things would be different.

Tomorrow is my big day — I wish I had known.

If you give the people around you the gift now, just think of what you could prevent later. Don't just preach. Don't just teach. Reach out.

Rebecca's creative response demonstrates her willingness to take risks. This piece also illustrates that she has a sense of audience. Both of these qualities allow her to develop her voice, which comes through again in her analysis of how she writes as a writer:

An analysis of how I write. Hmm. Well, this is a prime example. When I write, I always go through a long brainstorming stage. Usually I have a topic in mind, but I never start to write until I know exactly how I'm going to go about it. I think of different statements I would like to use, and lay the whole story out in my mind. Oh, that's another thing. Usually, I end up turning my free-lance writing assignments into stories or journal entries. Since I love history, I enjoy taking my knowledge of different time periods, combining them with a fictional character in my head, and creating journals and tales about their lives. Many times I'll write stories about how I wish my life would be. The nice thing about those is that since I created them, I can destroy them. What I mean by that is, my stories are so real to me, I begin to think, “Gee, I wish I could live like that!” and lose sight of the fact that my life is pretty good as it is. So I add some not-so-perfect aspects to my character's life and think, “Gee, I've got a really great life.” These situations also make my stories more believable. Hey, let's face it — no one's life is perfect.

When I write, I usually just sit down at my computer, turn on some great tunes, and let it flow out of me. Once in a while for school assignments I'll write a rough draft, but I've become very computer reliant in the past few years. I'm still not sure if that is a good thing.

I could write about how I write forever, but I would rather be reading. (Hey, it's how I get many of my ideas!) How do you close a writing analysis paper? Uh, I hope that you enjoyed this example of my brain on overload.

Rebecca's response and self-analysis reveal a number of insights. First, she spends time prewriting, which, for her, involves “a long brainstorming stage.” She generates “different statements” or points she wants to make and then “lay[s] the whole story out.” Even though she says she creates rough drafts only “once in a while for school assignments,” the fact that she is composing on the computer may indicate that she actually drafts as she writes, since composing on the computer makes the writing process more fluid. Most writers who make use of word processing draft and edit as they go; these are not distinctly different stages but rather a continuous process. It might also be noted that, as with many good writers, she is an avid reader, which is where she “get[s] many of [her] ideas!” These general patterns were also found in the responses of many of the stronger writers.

Knowledge of the writing process helped my better writers in a number of ways. First, contrary to weaker writers, stronger writers spent more time thinking about or talking about their topic. A number of students discussed the assignment with their parents, talking about everything from what constitutes effective teaching to where they and their peers may end up in the future. Those conversations were a crucial part of their writing processes.

Justin pointed out the importance of taking time to think about what you're going to say:

When I am writing the first thing I do is read then follow the directions in my assignment to make sure that I am writing what It asks me. Then I stop, sit, and think about what I am going to write and how I am going to format it.

While he goes on to detail his process, he makes an insightful Freudian slip of sorts:

Then I start writing and every once and a while I stop and make sure that what I am writing makes sense and it tells how I fill. Then when I am done writing about the topic I stop and make sure that there are no spelling or
How Did You Do That? The Secrets of Strong Writers

punctuation mistakes. Then I read it one last time and make sure it captures everything I want to say.

As Justin reveals, good writing is hard work. Many authors have come to spots in their writing where they have had to stop and pull their hair out in frustration, even if it's "every once in a wail."

In addition to talking about their writing assignment, many of the stronger writers made use of various prewriting techniques, such as listing, webbing, tree diagramming, or outlining. Carrie said, "When I write I start by 'brainstorming' ideas first then I put ideas together to form a rough draft."

Better writers attempt to list their main points or ideas and then put them in some kind of logical order. This skeleton doesn't have to take the form of the traditional outline. It merely needs to provide the writer with a sketch of what to say and in what order to say it. Pam commented:

When I write I have to think about what I'm going to say first. Sometimes I get a lot of ideas and organize them in my head and then write them down. Sometimes I make webs and cross things off but most of the time I just start writing and then check it.

Stronger writers tended to have a better handle on the overall writing process, as revealed by Kali's very insightful list of what she goes through when writing a piece:

1. Dread and complain about the paper.
2. Think about my intro. paragraph.
3. jot down some ideas

4. Write 1st draft
   edit myself
   then get mom, dad, sister to edit
5. 2nd then Final Draft.

Good writers tend to revise as they write. Jonathan said, "I just edit on the computer as I type. As I read over it, I look for more exact descriptions." Being one of my more mature writers, he went on to explain how he experiments with sentence variety: "Last, but not least, I like to be creative with my sentence variation. Sometimes I come up with variations that don't exist!"

Steph was one of the few student writers who was not only aware of the process, but illustrated an understanding of audience:

As a writer I brainstorm ideas. Whether they are for a poem, a diary, a letter or any piece of writing, I just attempt to sequence the thoughts in a order that would fit the audience, if it be anyone or myself. I usually try to put the words in a fashion that would be understood by whomever. A type of diagram, an intro, a basic center, and conclusion is what I've hopefully jotted down ... Sometimes writing has no exact form whatsoever.

Her last comment about form is particularly insightful. Authors write for a purpose. They have a heartfelt point that they feel needs to be passed on to their audience. The form of the writing takes a back seat to the actual purpose. Hence the expression "form follows function." However, good writers are conscious of the different models available to them. Kara makes use of a tried-and-true form: "I usually use about 4 different paragraphs and an introductory and conclusion."

Most good writers go through some kind of editing once they feel they start closing in on a final draft. Scott writes:

I then read through it to see if there are any corrections that need to be made. After completing the search for corrections I write the final draft. When the final draft is done I read it again and have someone else read it to see if I need anything corrected or if I missed something in the first place.

As with many of the better writers, Scott made use of editors who have a vested interest in his writing. "My parents usually proofread my writing assignments before I hand it in."

My research shows that good writers have a significant other to whom they take their work. My better classroom writers have designated someone to read their work and to give them feedback. They have apparently learned that good friends do not make good respondents.

Good writers tended to have a better handle on the overall writing process, while weaker writers tend to "short sheet" the process. In fact, many of the problems that students seem to have are related to the process. Pieces that lacked development or that lacked a clear direction tended to be written by students who did not make good use of prewriting. Papers that had many stylistic problems or mechanical errors were written by students who did not conference or did not perform any kind of self-edit.
Teaching Applications

As a result of my research, I have modified the way I coach my students through a piece of writing. My job is not to tell them what to write, but to help them find something to write about. My better writers think before they write. Now I usually begin a writing assignment with a brainstorming session. For narratives, we brainstorm memories of events. With expository writing, we conjure up topics and issues of concern to the students.

I introduce different types of prewriting. Many students already know something about semantic mapping or webbing, a technique taught in the elementary grades; however, they don't develop their webs enough to organize their ideas. They generate a central topic and then run a mass of lines willy-nilly across the page, linked at the end to an idea that is often only tangentially related to the main topic. I take time to teach them how to cluster ideas and how to subordinate, coordinate, and superordinate topics and subtopics. I introduce tree diagrams, graphic organizers, and lists as other forms of prewriting that can be used in addition to a traditional outline. I have found that I must treat prewriting as a tangible step and require students to use one of the techniques shared in class. Otherwise, they'll return to freewriting as their only tool for initiating a piece.

My research shows that good writers have a significant other to whom they take their work. My better classroom writers have designated someone to read their work and to give them feedback. They have apparently learned that good friends do not make good respondents. I now require each of my students to take their writing to someone they trust for feedback — usually an older brother or sister or a parent who is able to give the critical feedback needed but present it in a loving way. This has been a valuable tool.

I sometimes give students a list of questions to help them focus their feedback, to drop their guards, and give each other meaningful feedback in peer response groups. For example, I might ask the following:

1. What do you find interesting about the title; why does it draw you in?
2. What is interesting about the introduction; does it draw you in? How can it be improved?
3. What is the thesis statement? Is it clear and concise? Does it take a specific stand?
4. Does the piece provide a minimum of three arguments? How could the arguments be improved?
5. Are transitional words used (first, second, third, additionally, etc.)?

I also offer input before a student ever turns in a piece to be evaluated, meeting with the students one-on-one and providing comments to them on the pieces that they've selected to take to a final draft. As I read the piece, I ask questions about things I don't understand, but I also provide suggestions pertaining to content and structure. If the student wants me to, I'll also identify errors related to grammar and mechanics. In fact, I don't have to put many comments on my students' papers any longer, because I've already made most of my comments during our conferences.

Finally, I make sure students self-edit. During our conferences, I have them keep track of the grammatical problems we've discussed. We create a checklist recording the words they tend to misspell, their problems with mechanics, and so on. Before they submit their final drafts, I have them read their papers aloud to themselves, a practice that helps them pick up awkward phrasing, missing words, and subtle nuances that might otherwise be overlooked. They then use their checklists to do a final scan for errors or for structural problems.

My use of these teaching strategies arose out of my research, as well as my examination of my own habits as a writer. By taking a close look at my students' habits, I was able not only to identify those strategies used by strong writers, but to make sure that some of these habits were incorporated into any writing instruction for all my students.

References


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