Writing for the Rest of Us

by

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Recently I spoke to a high school English teacher about the possibility of implementing writing workshops in her classes. She agreed that her sophomores might benefit from such a program but felt it would be inappropriate for her juniors, since "They already know how to write!"

However, most of us find learning to write a lifelong challenge. My most recent mentor is my colleague and friend, Art Peterson, whom Quarterly readers know for his passionate quest for clear, lively, insightful prose. Before becoming editor for the National Writing Project, Art taught high school English and history for thirty-two years, writing books and publishing curricular materials in his "spare time." Several years ago, Miriam Ylvisaker, then NWP Editor, asked Art if he'd consider writing a book about writing. The result is The Writer's Workout Book: 113 Stretches Toward Better Prose, containing forty brief essays and over a hundred writing activities that can be used by aspiring writers and composition teachers alike. True to his own advice, Art's essays and minilessons are a pleasure to read, full of his unique wit as well as sound instruction for writers. Here we excerpt Art's opening essay which boldly proclaims that writing is a skill, not a gift — a skill that can be taught and learned. Due out this spring, The Writer's Workout Book can be ordered through the National Writing Project.

—PTL

I have a warm spot in my heart for used lesson plans. Along with unspent lile and the keys to a long-gone Dodge Dart, these documents have made it to the "Someday This Stuff Will Come In Handy" corner of my basement. Now, I have had the opportunity to burrow through years of personal classroom history, sorting out the inspired ideas and good tries from the false starts and bad judgments. Out of this rummaging, I've created 113 writing workouts to help students, and especially teachers, think about the small steps writers take as they learn their craft.

I say especially teachers because I suspect I am not the only teacher who has felt uneasy teaching "Writing." For me, what writers do has always seemed kind of artsy and exotic. The writer's life was a big jump from the tenured and bureaucratic existence to which I had submitted myself. I was too (blush) normal to know much about writing. I had been neither On The Road nor Over the Cuckoo's Nest. The black dogs of depression that drove Franz Kafka to great literature had seldom intruded on the core optimism which allowed me to thrive as a teacher. Sure, I had been a writer, but mostly a writer of "curriculum guides." I ask you, would Norman Mailer be caught dead writing a curriculum guide?

These were my insecurities when I was invited to spend five weeks one summer as a teacher-consultant with the Bay Area Writing Project. I am not going to tell you that this experience — with its requirement that the participants write — awakened some inner muse and unsealed a vein of talent I did not know I had. No. Rather, I began to wonder if talent wasn't — well — overrated. Working through many revisions, I came to believe what the ads from the Famous Writers' School had been telling me all along: Writing can, indeed, be learned.
Even more importantly, I came to see that as a teacher of writing my job was not to scout out fledgling candidates for some future Book Critics' Circle Award, but rather to use writing to help all students learn to think, including — maybe even especially — those students who, in their lives, will write very little. I saw that the future waitpersons, stockbrokers and garage mechanics in my class needed the writer's ability to generate, develop, organize, alter and evaluate ideas just as much as the student who would someday take a shot at the Great American Novel.

From then on my job as a teacher became to isolate, teach and connect the practical attitudes and skills which would help my students act like writers. I began to think of writing as The Basic Skill, essential not only for the bookish kids who were already trying out reasonable facsimiles of Sylvia Plath, but also for those students who would someday argue with a landlord, tell a joke or court a lover. So just what is it that writers do that we should all be doing?

Writers Speak Up
H.L. Mencken once described writing for a living as a kind of personality disorder: "[The writer's] overpowering impulse is to gyrate before his fellow men, flapping his wings and emitting defiant yells. This being forbidden by the police, he yells on paper. Such is the thing called self-expression."

I have no doubt that, on many a Saturday night, any number of the students I have taught have carried on vigorously in the manner Mencken describes. Monday morning, however, is a different story. How do we nudge students to flap their arms on paper, to have confidence that their experience is worth gyrating about?

As a teacher of writing, I have spent many hours prodding students into believing in the importance of sharing what is unique about them.

"Why don't you write about that?" I ask an American-born Korean girl who is describing the fights which occur between her and her immigrant mother each time the girl wants to wear white — a color associated with death in Korean culture. "Why would anyone else care?" she wonders.

"I don't think it's very interesting," demurs the babysitter who, in an essay, has just exposed in ironic detail the hyper-rigid child-rearing practices of the 60s radical for whom she babysits. When I tell her that some people would pay for this information, she allows herself a slight smile. The workouts in Part I of this book are intended to help novice writers such as these develop confidence in the value of their experience.

Writers Pay Attention
The writing classroom is not the place for a test every Friday. Whatever seeds are sown cannot be harvested at weekly intervals, and indeed, they may sprout and blossom only years later.

I was reminded of this understanding when I ran across an "average" student of several years previous who had just seen soon-to-be Vice President Al Gore up close.

"His hands don't fit his body," she said. "He's got these fingers that start thick and grow thin at the ends. He's a big guy, and he is always moving these delicate hands around as he talks. It makes him seem pretty sensitive for a jock type."

I wanted to change her grade. The woman had learned — alas, maybe not from me — what I was trying to teach: She was paying attention.

While students are in my class, I want them to learn to take in everything, a habit I try to model. I believe I lead a richer life because I've learned to see like a writer. I am addicted to noticing both the trivial — the principal's socks that don't quite match today — and the important — the tough kid who winces ever so slightly as I read aloud a Karl Shapiro poem, demonstrating that maybe he is not as immune to the power of poetry as he claims.

Part II of The Writer's Workout Book presents challenges to sharpen observation skills.

Writers Think First
In a culture in which a "dialogue" is often composed of advocates and critics of cross-dressing yelling at each other between commercials on Sally Jessy Raphael, writers provide an anchor of reasonableness. Writers — at least good writers — don't jabber or blurt. They organize their minds. They provide models that convince even when they irritate.

When we sign on as teachers, we commit ourselves to battling nonsense. I can't say my classroom has al-
ways been a bastion of orderly thought, but when a colleague told me, somewhat disap-
provingly, that students came out of my class “pretty left brainy,” I took this remark as a com-
pliment.

When I have thought about my teaching goals, I have sometimes conceived a scenario in
which, maybe ten years into the future, any one of the thousands of students who have been
through my classroom will, one night, unable to sleep, flick on a late night radio call-in show
and hear someone speaking in hushed tones of suppressed cancer cures or of scientists who
have met mysterious deaths after designing automobiles that run on mineral water or of the
first American moon landing that was, says the caller, a mirror trick. And the former student
will ask the darkness, “Says who?”

The workouts in Part III of this book promote the power of logical argument.

Writers Consider Other People
Teachers and students spend a lot of time feeling each other out, looking for ways to con-
nect. They need to be, as they say in the writing texts, “aware of their audiences.”

Having some sense of the teacher as audience, a student is not likely to respond to an essay question with
sentences like “Desdemona, she burst fresh out of
sight.” A teacher, on the other hand, needs to com-
municate in language that takes into account the val-
ues, knowledge and tastes of her students without
resorting to quoting from the latest issue of Sassy
magazine. The writing classroom provides a dicey, if
instructive, laboratory for communication that con-
siders others.

The workouts in Part IV present ways for writers to
connect with an audience.

Writers Create Choices
Most students come to writing class reluctant to pur-
sue the possibilities that working writers take for
granted. This may be because they have learned to
be very nervous about “whoing” when they should
been “whoming” and the like. These fears limit their
willingness to take chances. I have taught many stu-
dents who, if they were quarterbacks and I the coach,
would want me to script not just the first ten plays, but
the entire game, regardless of what happens on the field.

So even as I am committed to structured learning, I
often have quoted Thomas Edison: “There ain’t no
rules here; we’re trying to get something done.”

I want students to understand that a command of
rhetoric opens up worlds of precise nouns and power verbs, accurate comparisons and imagined scenarios, simple sentences and baroque paragraphs.

I have spent much of my career trying to convince stu-
dents that just because they are writing for school, they
do not have a responsibility to be boring. Yes, I tell the
student bogged down in a generic “report” on the
Golden Gate Bridge, it’s O.K. to tell about how, as a
young boy at the bridge’s 50th anniversary celebra-
tion, he thought he was going to die — crushed to
death or drowned — as he was stuck in a gridlock of
thousands of older and taller people, inching across
the perilously swaying span. Yes, he could do that and
also make sure we knew that the bridge was a “sym-
metrical cantilevered suspension,” engineered by Joseph Strauss and opened on April 28, 1937.

Another time, a student presented a precise but pedantic analysis of the Matisse painting *Femme Au Chapeau*, one of the jewels in the collection of the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art.

“So,” I asked, “what is it that attracts you to the museum?”

“You meet a better class of men there,” she said.

Her next draft kept the analysis but was a lot more interesting.

The workouts in Part V explore the rhetorical choices available to writers.

**Writers Love Words**

I’ll admit that, to the uninitiated, the little rush of joy that comes over a writer when, in revision, “natty” replaces “neat,” may seem an over-refined pleasure, like the thrill the fox hunter feels when the hounds pick up the scent. But as a teacher of writing, my job is to create language addicts, to load students up with words that connote anger or humor, that establish sympathy or sarcasm.

I remember a girl discussing her college essay with me. She was a flute player applying to a prestigious music department. I asked if she played any instruments other than the flute.

“I used to play the ocarina,” she said.

We were on to something. In the final draft of her essay, the word “ocarina” turned up at the beginning and at the end. How could an admissions officer resist this artful use of a lovely word? The girl was accepted. Later she wrote to say she was the leader of the only ocarina trio on campus. I wanted to think she wasn’t joking.

The workouts in Part VI explore the pleasures and possibilities of words.

**Writers Keep Trying**

As we will see, much advice about writing is paradoxical. The chief among these paradoxes may be that writing is both easy and difficult. On the one hand, because we all have language, writing comes naturally. We need only purchase a paisley-covered journal, a pen with the right colored ink, a cup of latte at a commodious cafe and settle down to uncork our personal reservoir of words and thoughts. This isn’t me. For me, reading over my deeply-felt first draft is often like waking from a dream in which I have performed lifesaving brain surgery only to realize I don’t even know the difference between the cerebrum and the cerebellum.

I have had many students who write with more ease than I do. Still, I have worked to discourage the lackadaisical attitude which E.B. White satirizes in the doggerel: Sing ho, sing hey / He thinks he’d like to write a play / But only at certain times of day.

Natural is a start, but then comes the mixing and distilling, shrinking and expanding, tightening and loosening that is revision.

Unfortunately, when I mount my classroom soapbox preaching the need to keep reworking a piece, I sound rather like McGuffey’s Reader, circa 1895: Persistence, hard work, self-discipline pay off. The kids start drifting away, more because of my stridency than my sentiment.

Sometimes I find it more effective to merely call attention to a remark by Thomas Mann: “A writer is someone for whom writing is harder than it is for other people.”

The workouts in Part VII and elsewhere in this book help make the difficult work of revision, if not exactly fun, at least intellectually diverting.

Finally, a disclaimer to be read as if it were printed in red ink and capital letters: The workouts in this book are inspired by my lessons, but they are not intended to be your lessons. In 30 years I have collected wonderful ideas, large and small from hundreds of teachers, but I have never found an idea that could be transported intact to my classroom. Even my own lesson, fresh off the drawing board for first period, often needs to be rebuilt for second period. All curriculum that works is made in individual classrooms. I present these 113 workouts as a gift for teachers who, like me, are inspired to create by reflecting on specific examples rather than general pronouncements. As they contemplate these teaching “recipes,” they will think of themselves not as cooks but as chefs.