

# Writing about Writing

## The Challenge of Helping Students “Get It Down on Paper”



BY ANDY WADDELL

In the 1954 novel *The Horse and His Boy*, part of “The Chronicles of Narnia” series by C. S. Lewis, an aristocratic young lady from a country called Calormen is called upon to relate her tale. Lewis describes the lady’s audience as listening avidly, “For in Calormen, story-telling (whether the stories are true or made up) is a thing you’re taught, just as English boys and girls are taught essay-writing. The difference is that people want to hear the stories, whereas I never heard of anyone who wanted to read the essays.” How true, how depressingly true!

As an English teacher, nothing I do is as important as teaching writing, and nothing is harder than getting a bunch of high school students to produce anything worth reading. After a quarter century on the job, it is still by far my biggest challenge.

Student essays are by and large dreadful concoctions of misremembered facts, misinterpreted passages, and misunderstood ideas, all spewed out in mangled grammar and creative spelling, cobbled together with a formulaic structure. No wonder I carry my stacks of papers home with a heavy heart. Nightly, they perch at the edge of my table like Poe’s raven, mocking me while I find something—anything—I absolutely must do first before I begin

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grading. Just one quick check of my email, maybe a tiny glance at Facebook, a short game of Spider Solitaire because I’m pretty sure it’s good for keeping my mind sharp—and then it’s down to business. Speaking of which, am I really prepared for tomorrow? Wouldn’t it be more productive to create a brand-new, exciting lesson plan than expend all my energies on putting red marks on a paper for students to throw away? And besides, to be fair to the students, I really need a time when I have total concentration. 10:00 p.m. already? I have to get up in seven hours. When will I be done grading? Nevermore.

Even so, I gnaw away at the edges of the stacks. My intention always is to limit myself to five minutes per paper, but more often than not it takes about 10. I have 150 students. At five minutes each, with no breaks, I can get through them all in 12 and a half hours. With breaks? Well, that’s another matter.

I pull out my trusty red pen and begin circling words and writing “SP” (spelling error) next to them. Naturally, the old standards “alot,” “narrator,” and “writting” rear their ugly heads, along with the classic homonyms: there/their/they’re, and to/too/two. Spelling is the least of my worries, but I do feel students need to at least be informed of their errors, as this is the primary way in which their writing will be judged after they leave school.

Whenever people gripe to me about how poorly others write, they inevitably refer to the misspelling they most recently read. If they know I’m a teacher, this is usually accompanied by a rant about

how superior things were back when they were in school. I've had many people claim to me that in their day, they'd get a failing grade for even one spelling or grammar error. "Between you and I, I feel badly for these kids," they tell me. "The whole school system has gone to hell..." If the speaker is over 53 (my age), I look at him skeptically. If he is my age or younger, I know he's full of baloney. As far as I can tell, there never was a golden age of spelling, and if there was, it was definitely before 1986, the year I started teaching.

Anyway, I can't afford to dwell too long on orthography; I have bigger fish to fry. "R/O" means run-on, and "Frag" stands for sentence fragment. "S/V" denotes that the subject does not agree with the verb, and "T.S." means that the verb tense has shifted, often within a sentence; to make it clearer, I circle the one verb and mark "past," and circle the other and mark "present." I also circle pronouns and loop back an arrow to the non-matching antecedent. And, of course, I'm continually adding or removing apostrophes and commas.

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Then there are those errors that are tough to pin down. I try not to use the old favorite "Awk," meaning awkward, as this is meaningless to students, but I am a big fan of "N.C." for not clear and the more emphatic all-caps "WHAT?," which are probably no more helpful. Clarity cannot be mended by a comment.

By the time I'm ready to pull out the rubric and decide if the organization is "below standard" or "approaching standard," whether the thesis was "insightful" or merely "clear," and whether the grammar, usage, and spelling errors "impede meaning," the paper looks like a crime scene. I try to add in a positive comment regarding the content of the essay, and I'm on to the next paper.

### Seeing the Bigger Picture

The full-blown, complete, graded essay is only one way to improve writing, and may not be the most effective if students merely glance at the comments, check the grade, and chuck the paper. I've tried forcing them to rewrite their papers, making all the noted edits, but this requires me to reread every essay and becomes more of a burden on me than on them. I have had more success with requiring students to write in their own words an explanation of why they received their grade. This I attach to the paper before it goes into their file.

Students who wish to improve, and who take the exercise seriously, can at least be made aware of what they have to work on. I

also always offer to speak individually with them to explain how they can write better. Conferencing of this type, with paper in hand, is extremely effective, but it is of course time-consuming. Very few take me up on the offer, and I'm not sure how I'd handle it if more of them did.

Whenever I meet another teacher and tell him I teach English, he inevitably shakes his head sympathetically and says, "Oh, that's tough—you have all those papers to grade." I accept this pity graciously, understanding the intended kindness, but inside I'm seething. I have to bite my tongue to keep from blurting, "Why don't you have papers to grade?" What do we teach that cannot be expressed in words? Which of my fine colleagues received degrees in their particular disciplines without writing about the subject?

I recently spent virtually my entire winter break reading 120 8- to 10-page research papers that are a required part of our junior English classes. Nine out of 10 of these papers were on social studies topics, and the 10th dealt with science. None concerned litera-



ture, language, or anything else in my area of expertise. Hour after hour, day after day, paper after paper, I found my resentment growing. I thought about all the class time I had expended in teaching research methods, evaluating sources, and citing information, and how many things about American literature I had never gotten around to. It's not that I am against research; in fact, I think it should be a part of every class. But if there is any class where a research paper really belongs, that class is history, because research is what history is.\* That is what historians do. Teaching history or any of the social sciences without teaching research is like teaching math without doing any problems.

Research, I am told by my colleagues, is not part of the California State Content Standards for history. This is not entirely true. The old standards call for high school students to "construct and test hypotheses; collect, evaluate, and employ information from multiple primary and secondary sources; and apply it in oral and written presentations." At my school, as far as I can tell, this is much more often applied to group posters and PowerPoint presentations than to individual research and writing. And when writing is used in these classes, mainly for exams, the teachers tell me they merely

\*For more on the importance of history research papers, see "Meaningful Work: How the History Research Paper Prepares Students for College and Life," in the Winter 2011–2012 issue of *American Educator*, available at [www.aft.org/pdfs/americaneducator/winter1112/Fitzhugh.pdf](http://www.aft.org/pdfs/americaneducator/winter1112/Fitzhugh.pdf).

scan for key words and devote no part of the grade to how logically or clearly the information is presented.

In this regard, I have high hopes for the new Common Core State Standards, which call for students to “write routinely over extended time frames (time for research, reflection, and revision) and shorter time frames (a single sitting or a day or two) for a range of tasks, purposes, and audiences.” Note that this standard applies to history/social studies, science, and technical subjects, as well as English. Furthermore, certain standards—such as “Use precise language and **domain-specific vocabulary** to manage the complexity of the topic,” and “Establish and maintain a formal style and objective tone while attending to the **norms and conventions of the discipline in which they are writing**” (emphasis added)—clearly spell out that we are now expected to do what we should have been doing all along: use writing to teach subject matter, and use subject matter to teach writing. In the meantime, the burden still falls disproportionately on us English teachers to make students express themselves coherently, and then to evaluate whether they’ve done it.

This brooding is not helping me, so I refocus on grading. After an hour or two, a strange thing happens: I start to enjoy myself. The papers don’t improve exactly but a calm descends over me. I stop marking every single error, and when I do slash away with “Old Red,” a sense of ironic detachment has displaced my former dependency. The same errors that enraged me begin to make me smile as I hear the students’ personalities come through. Even the worst papers often have a sense of voice, albeit often inappropriate to the task at hand.

One of my students, a hulking young lad who came into the final with a solid 30 percent grade, nevertheless did take time to write the essay, an evaluation of a quote by Thoreau. His opening—“You want my opinion? YOU WANT **MY** OPINION!?”—made me laugh so hard I disturbed the patrons around me at the coffee shop where I was grading and woke the gentleman at a nearby table. It was impossible for me to read the line without seeing the young man’s face.

I wouldn’t say that my standards flag; it’s just that I start to see the bigger picture. As public school teachers, we must take whatever students come our way and move them forward. And, although it’s sometimes tough to see, they do improve. My school keeps writing portfolios of all our students. Sometimes, I look through the folder of one of my better writers and am amazed to see how poorly she wrote freshman year. And when I check the file of a poor writer, I often find that two years before she was a God-awful, horrible writer. Improvement is improvement.

## Preparing to Write

Is it any surprise that the first step of writing is having something to say? *New York Times* columnist David Brooks tells his students at Yale that “by the time they sit down at the keyboard to write their essays, they should be at least 80 percent done. That’s because ‘writing’ is mostly gathering and structuring ideas.” Brooks calls his method, by the way, “geographical”—piles of notes scattered across a rug until he figures out a logical order for them.

Prewriting—whether through clustering, outlining, brainstorming, or pair-share discussion—helps students summon up what they have to say and come up with at least some idea of how to say it. Of course, it only works if they have the knowledge to back up their assertions. For a history paper, this means research; for

a science paper, experimentation; for a literature essay, it means a close reading of the text. Only then, after gathering enough knowledge to have an opinion, after marshaling the requisite proof, is the student really ready to write.

Next comes drafting. The mantra is: “Just get it down on paper. Don’t worry about spelling and grammar. We can fix it later.” Anne Lamott, in her book *Bird by Bird: Some Instructions on Writing and Life*, makes a solid case for the shoddy first draft as a necessary part of the creative process. She warns against perfectionism, which she dubs “the voice of the oppressor.” As a writer, I am completely hypocritical on this point. I tend to micromanage my own production, wordsmithing to a ridiculous degree, slashing at the backspace key again and again before I complete a simple paragraph. Still, I see the value in the approach, so when I see a student staring at the blank page as the appointed hour wears away, I sidle up to the desk and whisper, “Just get it down on paper. Don’t worry about spelling and grammar. We can fix it later.”

## The Common Core State Standards spell out what we should have been doing all along: use writing to teach subject matter, and use subject matter to teach writing.

The next stage, revision, is the most difficult. Revision involves looking hard at one’s writing to see if the objective has been met. Has the question been answered? Has the thesis been proven? Is there sufficient proof? Is the organization logical? In other words, is the paper clear?

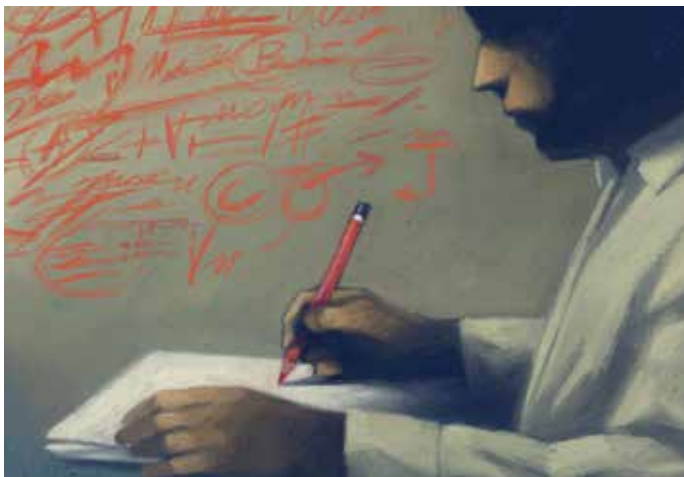
My students are used to assignments that are extremely prescriptive: a literature-based question neatly formulated to be answered with three main supports, hence with introduction and conclusion, the standard five-paragraph essay. This form, as ancient and versatile as the Pee Chee folder, achieved its apex with the advent of the Jane Schaffer Writing Program. In the 1990s, Schaffer further mechanized the writing process by breaking down the body paragraph into a specified series of concrete details (typically quotes from the text) and commentaries on those details. The result is neither exciting nor artistic, but it does provide a common language to use when speaking of revision.

Students can check their own or each other’s papers by simply asking, “Are there two specific details per body paragraph?” “Are they correctly introduced?” “Do the comments show clearly how these details help to prove the thesis?”

When I meet college writing instructors, they invariably say, “The first thing I tell my class is, ‘I’m going to unteach everything you learned in high school.’” I smile politely, and suppress the urge to argue. This old game persists at all levels of education:

we blame the teachers before us. I know we high school teachers like to mutter under our breath about the education our students get in middle school, and I have no doubt that the middle school teachers also sit around the staff room and gripe about how their students come to them knowing “absolutely nothing.”

My students typically enter high school knowing three things about writing: first, that no sentence may begin with the word “because,” second, that a paragraph is by definition five sentences long, and third, that they must begin an essay with a “grabber,” usually in the form of a rhetorical question. They are nonplussed when I inform them that the first two are not true, and they are dumfounded when many of my colleagues flatly disallow beginning any essay with a question. I don’t go as far as that, because the right question can in fact focus the reader’s intentions. So when I hear the professors whine, I let it go. I know they mean the formulaic, five-paragraph essay. I know how dull these are, and how tightly students can cling to this formula, even when it does not apply.



I also know these professors have never seen the stream-of-very-little-consciousness plot summary that is the first paper of the incoming ninth-grader. They have no idea of the labor it took to mold this inchoate mess into the formulaic writing they’re complaining about. I teach the five-paragraph essay. I teach the Jane Schaffer method, and I have seen firsthand its power to create confident writers. It is true that it imposes an artificial structure, but it is a first step, and only a first step.

### The Importance of Practice

In my district, we administer Performance-Based Assessments (PBAs) twice a year. These timed essays are read by two teachers, and the scores become part of the student’s record. I’m proud to be part of a district that puts this emphasis on writing, as opposed to relying on another multiple-choice test, but it is a good example of how even a good assessment limits instruction. Because I know that my students’ papers are going to be read by other teachers, and because that reflects on me, I feel pressure to bring my students in line with district expectations. For the most part, this is an excellent practice that has no doubt raised the overall writing level of our students.

On the other hand, practicing for the test takes up quite a bit of time that could be spent on other types of writing. I also know that anything that varies from the set standards will likely receive a poor

score, even if it is clear and logical. Readers are looking for five paragraphs, with a thesis at the end of the first paragraph and topic sentences at the beginning of each body paragraph. A writer skillful enough to imply his thesis is likely to fail.

This is the tyranny of the test. To be fair, we do grade holistically against a rubric; it’s not like the olden days when teachers just marked two points off for each spelling error, and minus five for each comma fault. Even so, to be reliable, tests must be uniform. To be considered important, results must be quantifiable. The data produced is indeed worthwhile, but we should be aware that not everything worthwhile is easily reducible to numbers on a chart. We run the risk of overvaluing anything that can be simply checked off and undervaluing everything that cannot.

For example, the year I came to my current school, the administration asked each department to provide three measurable goals for our students for the year. At my first department meeting, the first goal to make it on the list was, I kid you not, “M.L.A. (Modern

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Language Association) format.” When I suggested that perhaps that wasn’t one of our three main problems, I was told, “Yeah, but it has to be measurable.” So voice, tone, style, syntax, and even clarity lost out to making sure our students know whether the period goes before or after the citation. Fortunately, like most directives from administration, this one had no effect whatsoever. The goals were written on a chart somewhere and never looked at again.

The first PBA that my freshmen face is the simplest. They must read a story and write an essay explaining how the character changes as a result of the challenges he or she faces. This is a perfect fit for ninth-graders learning how to write the classic five paragraphs. One body paragraph about the character in the beginning, one on the challenges faced, and one on the newly transformed person we see at the end of the story. Formulate an introduction and a conclusion, provide decent proof, and you’ve got yourself a passing paper.

Before they ever sit down to write their own attempt at this topic, I prepare them for this task by having them write a group essay as an entire class. The essay is based on an excerpt from *Black Boy* by Richard Wright. In this section, 6-year-old Richard must take charge of the family’s shopping as his mother is gone all day working. At first pleased with this grown-up responsibility, Richard’s pride soon turns to fear when he is attacked and robbed by a group of bigger



boys. He turns to his mother for comfort, but she refuses, instead giving him more money, a big stick, and instructions to return with the groceries or not at all. Forced to overcome his fears, Richard wields his club like a wild man, not only protecting himself from robbery but chasing the boys home and even threatening to beat their parents who come out to protect them. He writes, "On my way back I kept my stick poised for instant use, but there was not a single boy in sight. That night I won the right to the streets of Memphis."

The story is highly engaging and the transformation so clear that writing the essay is simple. First, I ask for words to describe Richard in the beginning: "scared," "mama's boy," "naive," "stupid," "typical little kid," etc. I write them all down on the board. "OK, now read over that part and find two quotes from the story that show he is scared or naive or a mama's boy." I have them mark the quotes in the story and then share with the person next to them. Each pair reads the best quote aloud until we have four or five to choose from.

Next, I seek descriptions of Richard at the end: "fearless," "crazy,"

that?" I ask. "When his mom tells him he's going to the store alone," they tell me. I write: "When his mother tells him he is going to the store alone, Richard says 'I was proud; I felt like a grownup.'" I say, "See how I introduced the quote? OK, so why does that show he's a typical little kid?" After some discussion, they tell me that only a little kid would get excited about grocery shopping, and it also shows that he's a mama's boy who wants to impress his mother. These become our two commentary sentences.

These are "well-developed" paragraphs, seven to eight sentences each. Each body paragraph has two concrete details, in this case quotes from the text, with two sentences commenting on each one, explaining how the evidence proves the thesis. This process goes on and on until the students beg for mercy. Their hands are hurting. They've never written so much in their lives. When we've finished, we read it aloud and it's not half bad. It may not be immortal prose, but it's clear, coherent, and answers the prompt. Most important, if I've done it right and not given in to impatience, it is all their words.

I prove to the students that they already have enough insight and skill to speak about what the author accomplished and the effect he or she created.



"violent," "gangster," and so forth. Again, they repeat the process of finding good evidence from the text. We discuss which words are more effective and more accurate, and choose two adjectives and a noun from each list. I ask for words to describe the challenges that transform him: "fight," "anger," "stand up for himself," "mother."

Once I have their words, we can create a thesis. "In *Black Boy* by Richard Wright, a naive, scared mama's boy transforms into a fearless, violent gangster when his mother makes him stand up for himself." Besides telling them we need to mention the author and title, every word comes from them. Even if I disagree with them (for instance, whether any 6-year-old can be called a gangster), I bite my tongue and write it down. And that is how we proceed.

I type our essay into my computer and project it onto the screen. I make them copy it over by hand. These are ninth-graders after all, and most are simply incapable of paying attention for that long without having something to produce for "points." I control the pace and the process, but they control what I write.

"OK, what's our first body paragraph about?" I ask. "What he's like in the beginning," they shout back. "So what's he like?" We decide to write: "In the beginning of the story, Richard is just a typical 6-year-old." OK—that's our topic sentence—that's what this particular paragraph is about. Next, I ask for a quote that shows him as a typical little kid. They choose "I was proud; I felt like a grownup." "When was

When it comes time for them to write their own, I can project the file again and do a quick debrief. Remember writing this? What was this sentence here at the end of the first paragraph? Right, the thesis. How did we get that? Etc., etc., etc. Now you're going to do the same thing with a different story.

My idea is to demystify the process. By using their words, I prove to them that they, in fact, already have enough insight and skill to meet this new high school expectation, not just to retell the story, but to speak about what the author accomplished and the effect he or she created. In other words, they are writing about writing.

The next day, the training wheels are off; they're reading something brand new to them and writing about it. Facts are being misremembered, passages misinterpreted, and ideas misunderstood. Their grammar is as mangled as ever, their spelling just as creative. Some are struggling to recall the simple structure taught the day before. One or two are simply blinking at the terrible white sheet. "Just get it down on paper," I whisper to them. "Don't worry about spelling and grammar. You can fix it later."

Class is quiet now, only the scritch-scratch of pen on paper. Their brows are furrowed. I can see they're struggling. Of course they are; they're writing. □