

The **Teacher's Essential Guide** Series



Jim Burke

Content Area Writing

How to:

- Design Effective Writing Assignments
- Teach Students Expository Writing
- Assess and Respond to Student Writing



Dedication:

To America's newest teachers

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Introduction

“Writing is the largest orchestra your brain will ever have to conduct.”

—Mel Levine

Writing is the most public performance of our intelligence. Students who struggle with reading can hide out, pretending they understand something they never read or choosing simply not to participate in the discussion of a text. Writing, however, is present—in black and white—for all to see. And what we see worries many in both education and business.

Approximately 50 percent of all entering freshmen fail the English Placement Test at California State University and end up in remedial writing courses. American businesses pay out roughly two billion dollars a year for remedial writing instruction for employees who lack the skills needed to write reports that are both coherent and correct. And even adults who don’t need remediation often feel deep anxiety about formal writing.

With state exit exams and college placement tests such as the new SAT, we teachers now face increased scrutiny and pressure in the area of writing instruction. As Graham and Perin, the authors of *Writing Next*, note, “Along

with reading comprehension, writing skill is a predictor of academic success and a basic requirement for participation in civic life and the global economy” (2007). Writing is, in short, essential to students’ success in school, the workplace, and society at large. This book offers specific strategies to help us teach the skills and strategies students need if they are to achieve such success.

There are numerous aspects of writing instruction that intimidate teachers and often cause them to shy away from requiring students to write as often as they should. Many cite the time it takes not only to produce in-class writing but also to grade it. Others lack a sense of *how* to teach writing. The complexity of the writing process, which consists of both cognitive and emotional elements, can leave even the strongest teachers feeling ineffective, unsure of where to begin or how to proceed. Add to these anxieties the range of academic abilities represented in every class, each student with his or her own obstacles to becoming an effective writer.



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We need to know that there are techniques we can use to improve student writing and strategies we can employ to simply *get* them to write. This book focuses on both of these aspects of writing— learning to write and writing to learn,

for they each make different demands on both the student and the teacher.

Students now enter a world that expects them to be able to write many types of documents using a range of media. They enter into an “attention economy” (Lanham 2006) in which their words and ideas must compete with others’ if they are to succeed in delivering the intended message. They must be able to craft their message in 3,000 words, 300, 30, or, in some cases, none, using instead images and sound to say what words cannot capture. Such textual intelligence (Burke 2001) is the hallmark of modern literacy, which demands that students know how texts work so they can produce and read them effectively. One cannot develop such intelligence by osmosis; instead, it requires deliberate instruction. Writing is often *assigned*, but if students are to master this complex craft, it must be *taught*. This book is here to help you do just that.

Writing Instruction Self-Assessment

For each of the items below, record an answer between 1 and 5.

1 Never **2** Rarely **3** Sometimes **4** Usually **5** Always

- I design effective writing assignments and prompts.
- My students have no trouble generating ideas and details when writing.
- I teach my students to evaluate and analyze the effectiveness of their ideas and details.
- I teach students how to draft and revise their papers.
- I teach students strategies to polish their papers and provide opportunities for them to publish their papers.
- I effectively assess, respond to, and have students reflect on their papers.
- I teach students strategies for writing on demand.
- I teach students the elements of effective writing.
- Our school incorporates writing across the curriculum.
- I employ and teach students how to use computers and other technology to improve their writing.
- I have no trouble handling the paper load.
- I use a variety of strategies to support struggling writers
- I have no trouble with plagiarism in my class.
- I can effectively teach writing to large classes.
- I teach my students how to use writing to learn.
- My students are all motivated writers.

After completing this self-assessment, identify those areas with most urgent need of attention and improvement. For each statement to which your response was “never,” “rarely,” or “sometimes,” go to the corresponding chapter and learn what you can do to improve in that area.

1. Designing Effective Writing Assignments

What students are writing about invariably affects how well they write. The assignment or prompt is the seed from which the writing will grow, watered either by tears of frustration or the sweat of inspired labor. Writing teacher Don Murray (2004) divides assignments into two categories: open and closed. “The closed assignment . . . has a clear educational purpose—the teacher and the students know what the assignment intends to teach” (94), while the “open” assignment “allows the student to be an authority on the subject,” giving him or her the opportunity to create a topic and write in whatever form and style he or she choose. A closed assignment would be a traditional prompt that lays out the specific demands for the writer, something like, “Examine the effect of the Gold Rush on the culture of the West.” The open assignment, however, would ask students to come up with their own topic on the Gold Rush, allowing, for example, the student with a passion for the environment to focus on the effect of various mining techniques. As Murray himself concedes, however, the open assignment is “more difficult when there is

Guiding Principles

- Make clear the purpose of the writing assignment.
- Make the assignment meaningful and challenging.
- Place each assignment within the larger context of your curriculum.
- Align each assignment with your state and district standards.
- Convey clearly the criteria for success on an assignment.

content to the course. When writing is taught as an adjunct to literature or when writing is used to test a student's knowledge of a subject, then the open assignment is more difficult" (99).

Let's face it: In some cases, we ourselves have no choice as to what our students will write about on exams for the state or the SAT. Such institutional topics are inevitable fixtures in today's instructional landscape. More often than not, they illustrate one or more of the qualities Edmund Farrell argues are *not* part of a good assignment. Farrell (in Connors & Glenn, 1999) says that a good assignment does *not*:

- Lead to an unfocused or too-short answer, such as "How do you feel about the ozone layer?"
- Pose too many questions in its attempt to elicit a specific response
- Ask students for too personal an answer, such as "Has there ever been a time in your life when you just couldn't go on?" or "What was the most exciting thing that ever happened to you?"

What *is* common to all good writing assignments, according to Farrell, is that they:

- Are meaningful to the students, though this does not necessarily mean the assignments are personal
- Are authentic, providing some context for writing that makes sense to the students; this does not mean they must always write a useful document such as a letter or an editorial, but it does mean that the writing should serve a purpose the students recognize as real



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- Ask for writing about “specific and immediate situations rather than abstract and theoretical ones”
- Suggest a single major question to which the thesis statement of the essay is the answer
- Help students practice specific stylistic and organizational skills

Here, then, are some guidelines for designing writing assignments and prompts:

Make clear the purpose of the writing assignment.

When you have students write, no doubt you do so with a specific purpose in mind. A social studies teacher might want them to show how one event led to another, or to contrast two cultures, leaders, or periods. For English teachers, writing assignments often involve responding to or interpreting other texts, though if you are teaching composition, the assignment might well call for a persuasive essay as part of a larger unit on argument. Whatever the subject, a good assignment requires clearly stated outcomes, all of which should be written out (instead of spoken or jotted down on the board). Here are some suggestions to keep in mind when designing an assignment:

Determine and clearly state the purpose of the assignment. Will students: analyze, compare/contrast, define, describe, evaluate, persuade, explain, and/or summarize? Take time to have students underline and discuss these words and their implications for writing. Focus on just one or a few of these skills with each assignment.

Specify the requirements of the assignment in writing.

These might include all or some of the following:

- Genre (e.g., essay, letter, opinion piece)
- Length
- Deadline
- Documentation (e.g., works cited, bibliography)
- Steps (e.g., brainstorm ideas, outline, draft)
- Assessment criteria
- Introduction
- Directions
- Standards addressed by this assignment
- Requirements (e.g., number of texts they must refer to in their research paper, amount of data they must include in their analysis)

Identifying the standards for any given assignment is, in some districts, a requirement; for others, it is simply a useful part of the planning process, one that assures you are teaching your students the lessons the state expects them to learn.

Take time to discuss the assignment with your students, going over key words that signal which strategy to use (e.g., analyze, define, persuade, contrast). In addition to taking time to discuss the assignment, be sure they know what they must do and what a successful performance on this assignment will look like.

Here is a sample assignment, one I created for my freshman class at the end of a unit on our relationship with the natural world.

Our Relationship With the Natural World Writing Assignment

Standards

This assignment addresses California Language Arts standard 2.3: Write expository compositions that marshal evidence in support of a thesis and related claims, including information on all relevant perspectives, and convey information and ideas from primary and secondary sources accurately and coherently.

Topic

Compare and contrast the different types of relationships humans have with the natural world. Include examples from your own experience and the different texts we have read or viewed. After comparing and contrasting, make a claim about what you feel are our rights and responsibilities toward the natural world in general. Provide reasons and evidence to support your claim.

Requirements

2- to 3-page typed paper, double-spaced, with appropriate headings and bibliography. Must include examples and quotations from at least three texts

Deadline and Evaluation

Rough draft is due Wednesday; final draft is due the following Wednesday. Your paper will be evaluated according to the criteria outlined on the attached rubric.

Make the assignment meaningful and challenging.

While common sense suggests that assignments related to students' interests would inspire hard work and better writing, this is not always the case. In recent years I have seen the following topics on district writing assessments, no doubt selected because of their connection to students' interests:

- Write a letter to the principal explaining why students should or should not be allowed to have cell phones at school.
- Write an essay in which you argue for or against school uniforms.
- Write an essay for or against video games, explaining why you think they are or are not beneficial to those who play them.

Clearly these topics relate to and interest kids. Yet as someone who had to sit all day in a cold room with other teachers and read these essays, I found the topics resulted in writing that tended toward ranting as opposed to effective argument. The fact that the essays, despite all the emphasis on their importance, had no consequence and received no grade further undermined any investment in the writing. What should we do, then, to ensure that our students are motivated and able to write well on our assignments? Following are some suggestions:

Consider all the possible forms that might be appropriate for this writing assignment. Options might include essays, letters, op-eds, narratives, Web sites, speeches, summaries, and research papers. Other possibilities exist, of course, but as our focus here is academic writing, we will not examine those.



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Ensure the assignment is meaningful by connecting it to students' experience. This does not necessarily imply the assignment has to delve into students' personal lives, but it does recognize that students have a limited range of experiences to draw on based on their age and circumstances. Often we assume they have learned about subjects or had experiences they have not and are thus not prepared to write about. The social studies teacher can surely ask students to write about a particular invention from the Industrial Age that revolutionized the world but may engage her students and get better writing (and thinking) if she asks them to compare that Industrial Age invention with one from the present and then to explain how the modern invention will have a similar effect on the economy, culture, or people.

Look for or create authentic opportunities to write for purposes that motivate students. My students, over the years, have written biographies of centenarians for a local hospital, letters to officials, and speeches that they later delivered before audiences made up not only of classmates but the mayor, superintendent, and other local leaders. They cannot always be writing for real audiences like these, but when they can, they should. After I took my freshmen to visit the University of California at Berkeley, for example, they wrote formal letters in which they reflected on what they learned, discussed what impressed them, and thanked the program director for arranging the visit. These letters, which we sent, were later used by the program director to show the value of her program and ensure its continued funding.

Make room for students' own voices in the assignments whenever possible. They understand that you have to teach them certain academic forms, but this does not necessarily mean they cannot write in ways that express their own ideas. Regardless of what subject you teach, think of the great writers in your field and the distinct voices they bring to their writing: E. O. Wilson (science), Garry Wills (politics), David McCullough (history), Keith Devlin (math), and many others, of course. Making room for students' own voices means making room for them in the assignment, and this increases the likelihood of greater engagement.

Place each assignment within the larger context of your curriculum.

Each assignment is, or should be, part of a larger sequence appropriate to your subject. Such sequencing is crucial, as some assignments demand much more than others. An assignment should require skills students already have or those you will be able to effectively teach within the context of that assignment. The following are a few recommendations to follow when planning a sequence or creating an assignment:

Consider the cognitive demands of each assignment in light of the overall goals of your course. We traditionally divide writing into four modes: narration, description, exposition, and argumentation, often assigning them to different grade levels, though, in truth, students should be working in these different modes constantly. The first two, narration and description, tend to be easier for students because these modes are based on more concrete material: events they personally experienced or things they have observed and can describe. As assignments become more abstract, they often become more difficult to write about.

Arrange assignments in order of difficulty, using each assignment to teach those skills that will prepare them for the next. Teaching students how to summarize on one assignment will give them the skills they need when asked later to insert quotations and summaries of other sources as part of a larger paper with a more challenging goal.

Embed within each assignment those smaller but no less important skills your students need to achieve the course objectives. Good writing assignments inevitably integrate within them a series of smaller writing opportunities, each of which allows you to teach such skills as summarizing, taking notes, responding to an idea, and paraphrasing another's argument as you formulate your own.



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Keep in mind the important connection between writing, reading, and speaking, all three of which complement one other. Each writing assignment provides rich opportunities to focus on these other areas throughout the assignment. Rarely will any instructional sequence allow you to focus on only one of these three fundamental literacies, so the instructional sequence must ensure that students are taught the necessary skills at each step.

Align each assignment with your state and district standards.

Almost every state in the country has adopted standards for just about every subject area. Most, if not all, of those standards include requirements for writing appropriate to that subject area. Some districts have adapted the state standards to their own local needs, culling out and emphasizing what are often called “power standards.” Such power standards are those standards the department emphasizes but which are still part of the required state framework. Here are a few representative examples:

Physical Science: Interpret, display, analyze, and draw conclusions from the results of a scientific investigation.

English/Language Arts: Compose a written message/ statement utilizing the correct format to focus writing for audience and purpose.

Social Studies: Compare and contrast different cultures in terms of family, social class, religion, education, arts, and other aspects of daily life.

Here are a few strategies to use when designing your own assignments:

- Consult your state and district standards to identify those standards which are a natural part of the assignment you are creating. Include the standards on your assignment handout to identify to your students those goals central to the assignment. You do not have to list them all, nor must you use the bureaucratic language of the state. Notice that on my sample assignment on page 12, I list only one standard and, because they form a useful checklist, the subpoints, as well.

- Use the academic language appropriate to these standards to ensure that students learn it. In my freshman English class, for example, we take time to study the specific terms of argument (e.g., claim, reason, evidence, rebuttal) as we learn and practice them within the larger context of an assignment that calls for them to write an op-ed piece for or against the existence of zoos in the wake of a recent occurrence in which a tiger escaped from its enclosure.
- Integrate the standards into your assessment criteria. One measure of your instructional effectiveness should be that students have made progress toward or mastered the standard.

Convey clearly the criteria for success on an assignment.

As you begin to design assignments, you must always have the end result in mind. Know what the criteria are by which you will measure it. Such criteria also help to anchor your instruction and direct your use of class time: Is this activity or lesson related to the goal? Will it lead the students to success on this assignment? If not, rethink your assignment.

Ericka Lindemann's (2001) "Heuristic for Designing Writing Assignments" is very helpful for determining appropriate criteria. Lindemann recommends asking yourself the following questions as you plan.

1. **What do I want the students to do?** Is it worth doing? Why? What will the assignment tell me about what they've learned? How does it fit my objectives at this point in the course? Does the assignment assess what students can *do* or what they *know*? Am I relating their work to the real world (including academic settings) or only to my class? Does the assignment require specialized knowledge? Does it appeal to the interests and experiences of my students?

2. **How do I want them to do the assignment?** Are students working alone or together? In what ways will they practice prewriting, writing, and rewriting? Are writing, reading, speaking, and listening reinforcing one another? Have I given students enough information to make effective choices about the subject, purpose, form, and mode?
3. **For whom are students writing?** Who is the audience? Do students have enough information to assume a role with respect to the audience? Is the role meaningful?
4. **When will students do the assignment?** How does the assignment relate to what comes before and after it in the course? How much time in and outside of class will students need for prewriting, writing, and rewriting? To what extent will I guide the students' work? What kinds of help can students constructively offer one another? What deadlines do I want to set for collecting the students' papers (or various stages of the project)?
5. **What will I do with the assignment?** How will I evaluate the work? What constitutes a "successful" response to the assignment? Will other students or the writer have a say in evaluating the paper? What problems did I encounter when I responded to this assignment? How can I improve the assignment? (221)

The following suggestions offer some ideas about how to establish and communicate the criteria for a successful performance on any given writing assignment:

- Clearly list the criteria for success on the handout and clarify these criteria, explaining the terms as you go.
- Provide examples from the textbook or past student papers to show students what a successful performance looks like on this assignment. If, for example, one requirement is a clear and compelling claim, provide students with samples to illustrate what such a claim looks like.
- Revisit the criteria throughout the writing process. Make each criterion the focus of a mini-lesson to help students keep it fresh in their minds.

2. Teaching Students to Generate Ideas

All students occasionally struggle to get started on a writing assignment. Some struggle continuously. They may not engage with the assignment or it might ask them to write on a subject about which they know nothing. Or they may simply struggle, as John Steinbeck often did, to discover what to say and how to say it: “It is strange how this goes on. The struggle to get started. Terrible. It always happens. I am afraid.” Here Steinbeck recognizes what studies consistently emphasize: the internal obstacles to writing. Mark Twain compared writing to sending a bucket down into the well. When the bucket came up empty he knew it was time to get out into the world, usually by traveling on a steamboat down the Mississippi, to replenish his supply of stories. You can’t take your students down the Mississippi, but you can use the same strategies writers have developed over the years. And you can provide the supportive environment needed to take the risks and explore the possibilities that good writing requires.

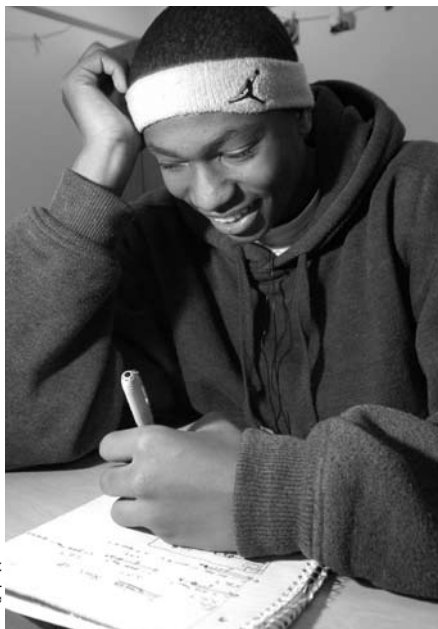
Mel Levine (2003) confronts the difficulty some students have with getting what is inside of them *out* onto the page, calling it the “myth of laziness.” Levine redefines this problem as “output failure,” something most students experience.

In my AP English Literature class, for example, all students feel overwhelmed by the challenge of writing about *Hamlet*, lacking the strategies they need to generate more complex ideas and find textual evidence to support those arguments; however, in my English class, these less experienced writers, many of whom have identified learning difficulties, lack more fundamental strategies for writing even about more familiar, concrete subjects, such as their own experiences. These troubles have greater consequences than in the past due to increased pressure from state tests, which now include writing assessments about typically dull topics students must discuss in a thoughtful essay written in 20

minutes, often incorporating details from an accompanying expository article they must first read.

Generating ideas is a little like making sausage: It's a messy process that requires you to grind ideas to make the final product palatable. Inexperienced writers often neglect this important stage, throwing down whatever comes to mind to get the assignment over with, while more experienced and advanced writers spend as much as half their writing time actually thinking, grappling with ideas, organizing structures, arguments, and

details for the assignment they must write. If students are to become consistently effective writers, however, they must learn a range of strategies they can use to generate such material, especially when they struggle to get anything out at all. This chapter offers you specific techniques you can teach students so they can get their great ideas out of their head and onto the page.



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Guiding Principles

- Have students read to learn new ideas about the subject.
- Have students write to discover what they know and need to learn about their topic.
- Talk through the prewriting process to generate and elaborate on ideas.
- Ask questions to create new associations and deepen initial thinking.
- Observe models, procedures, productions, and performances.
- Have students use graphic organizers to stimulate ideas and make connections.
- Provide critical thinking strategies to help students articulate ideas.

Have students read to learn new ideas about the subject.

Ask students to read a particular text with the purpose in mind of generating ideas for the paper they must write. If, for example, you want students to write a paper on the connection between food and health, have students read a range of texts, taking notes as they read newspaper articles and textbooks and view documentaries and Web sites. In such cases, students are using these texts not to study but to gather information about the subject. To get ideas for this chapter, for example, I read many books and articles on the writing process, taking notes as I read, just as in my English class students read sample personal narratives to give them ideas—about style and content—for the narratives they will write themselves.

Have students write to discover what they know and need to learn about their topic.

Writing to think or gather ideas can take several forms. Teach all these different techniques, allowing individual students eventually to choose which strategy works best for their thinking style. Free writing involves writing nonstop about the subject for a specified period of time and then sifting through that material for key ideas and interesting connections. Journaling, while similar to free writing, asks students to write informally about ideas or questions you provide, all of which are chosen for their ability to stimulate thinking related to the assignment. Other techniques include taking notes while reading or listening, listing ideas and possible titles, brainstorming and clustering ideas for a more visual way of generating ideas, and making connections before and during writing. In truth, I often use several of these approaches, beginning perhaps by asking students to write a list of associations, statements, titles, whatever ideas come to mind. Once they have generated some rough material, I will ask them to choose *one* idea from their list and then do a free write in



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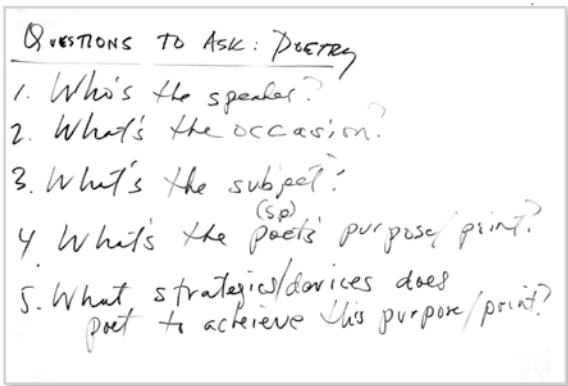
their notebooks for five or 10 minutes, after which I might, time allowing, ask them to reread what they wrote and underline those few ideas that rise to the top and show some potential. My next step might be to send them home with those ideas to do some more generative reading (or rereading) of relevant texts, and write a very sketchy outline for the next day.

Talk through the prewriting process to generate and elaborate on ideas.

Discussion is inherently generative, especially when combined with other strategies such as asking questions, observing, or reading. It is often useful to have students talk about the assignment and what they might say about it, taking notes as they do. For example, if I have students use a graphic organizer to generate ideas for their paper, I will usually have them work together to complete it, discussing their ideas as they work; or if they complete it on their own, I might then have them use that organizer as the basis for a discussion, the purpose of which is to add more details to and refine their own ideas on the topic at hand. Also, if students read a text or observe something (e.g., a video, a process, a performance), I will have them discuss it and ask them, during this conversation, to take notes on the key elements that they might use in the paper they need to write. In my freshman English class, for example, students were writing an essay on Odysseus's journey. To prepare them, we first discussed what the elements of a journey were by using a clip from *The Lord of the Rings*, which I repeatedly interrupted, asking them to turn to a partner and analyze the film. After further discussion, they had a working model of the journey cycle they could use for their paper. Throughout the writing process, of course, they continued to discuss how each step of the cycle applied to *The Odyssey*.

Ask questions to create new associations and deepen initial thinking.

Questions are the most important tools the writer has. When we write, there is always a question at the heart of the work, one we are trying to answer. I often begin an assignment by asking the class, “What are the questions we should ask to help us think about this topic?” For many students this is a new experience and they can find it difficult, wanting the teacher to “just give the answers.” Yet few strategies help more than learning to ask questions to stimulate thinking and evaluate the importance of what they have begun to gather. While this is a helpful beginning, other questions such as these have traditionally helped writers:



The Reporter's Questions: Who, what, where, when, why, how—and “So what?”

Classical Topics: What is it? (Definition) What is it like? (Analogy) What is the consequence? (Cause-Effect) What do the experts say? (Testimony)

Four Core Questions: What goes with what? (Association) What opposes/resists what? (Opposition)

What follows what? (Progression) What changes into what? (Transformation)

Analytical Questions: What is it made of? What type is it? What is the relationship between x and y ? How are a and b similar and different?

These are familiar and proven question sets, but each topic tends to suggest its own questions, those that will help unlock the ideas and potential within both the writer and the topic itself. In my freshman English class, my students write about a person who was an “ally” during a difficult or important phase of their lives. I give students three questions to help them generate and organize their ideas:

Problem: What was the problem or difficult experience this person helped you get through?

Solution: How did they help you get through this experience?

Consequences: What effect did this person’s actions have on you after it was over?

Before students use these questions for their own writing, they use them as reading tools as they analyze several models I have them read and annotate, labeling specific passages with these terms.

Observe models, procedures, productions, and performances.

Whether a movie or a science experiment, visual media can help make the abstract more concrete. Sarah Galvin, who teaches freshman English, showed a student-made documentary from YouTube.com on the Little Rock Nine as part of a unit on equality and inequality in communities. Instead of just having them passively watch, however, she gave them a graphic organizer, which they used to identify key details and then sort them into four categories. Next, Ms. Galvin extended these categories to connect this material to Steinbeck's *Of Mice and Men*, thus



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allowing the students to generate a much more analytical reading of the story. A graphic organizer (see page 32) then served as the basis for the writing assignment, providing structure and support for the class discussion and writing that followed.

This last point is important: Observation should involve other generative strategies—discussion, writing, taking notes, reading—to complete the generative transaction and thus prepare the student for the writing assignment. Observing can also

include examining models of the assignment. Whenever possible I give the class an example of the kind of writing that I want them to do, presenting it on the overhead and giving them a copy to annotate. We think aloud about what the text does that makes it effective. These observations often suggest an organizational structure to the student. For example, observing a scientific procedure, a student may realize it has a cause-effect pattern or a chronological one. Such patterns are themselves useful generative techniques as the students begin to think about, “Okay, what should go first? And now second? And so on.”

Have students use graphic organizers to stimulate ideas and make connections.

Graphic organizers offer powerful support for writers of all levels, providing a structure that helps students not only generate ideas but also identify connections between those ideas. I use them most often to help students in the initial phase of the writing process. The first step is to ask what kind of thinking you want the students to do and which tool might best support their efforts. A simple target, for example, can get students thinking about a topic. Write the topic (e.g., Industrial Age Inventions) in the center and then have eight different major discoveries in the inner circle. Students can then elaborate on each discovery in the spaces on the outer circle. This prewriting strategy lends itself to collaboration by allowing students to compare their results in small-group discussions, or you can use a whiteboard or transparency as a means of facilitating a full-class discussion. Use graphic organizers as a tool to generate and refine ideas, or pose questions.

Graphic organizers are useful when students read. A good graphic organizer helps students to sort their ideas and thoughts into creative material for subsequent writing assignments. Again, the key step is to ask what kind of thinking you want students to do and help them choose the tools that will facilitate such analysis.

Name: EMORY POMÉA Period: 7th Date: 1-10-07

Target Notes

Subject: _____

5/5 I bet you're excited about that new sleep movie coming out! Good details here, Emory. You are an interesting person!

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Provide critical thinking strategies to help students find and articulate writing ideas.

Often, students need structural support to generate and communicate their ideas. The language of critical analysis is difficult to acquire for some students, especially when they are reading texts that are new and difficult for them to understand. Creating lists on the board or posters on the wall with strategic sentence starters can help students begin the process of developing their initial ideas into language they can refine as they move through the writing process.

Sentence Structures: Helping Students Discuss, Read and Write About Texts

SENTENCE STARTERS

Making Predictions

I predict that . . .

If x happens, then . . .

Because x did y , I expect z .

Making Connections

X reminds me of . . .

X is similar to y because . . .

X is important to y because . . .

Summarizing

The main idea is . . .

The author argues that . . .

In _____, (author's name) implies . . .

Synthesizing

These elements/details, when considered together, suggest . . .

Initial impressions suggested x , but after learning _____ it is now clear that . . .

It is not a question of x but rather of y because . . .

SENTENCE FRAMES

Responding

X claims _____ which I agree/disagree with because . . .

X's point assumes y, which I would argue means . . .

While I agree that _____, you could also say . . .

Agreeing

Most will agree that . . .

I agree with those who suggest that . . .

X offers an effective explanation of why y happens, which is especially useful because most think that . . .

Disagreeing

I would challenge x's point about y, arguing instead . . .

X claims y, but recent discoveries show this is . . .

While x suggests y, this cannot be true since . . .

Arguing

Although x is increasing/decreasing, it is not y but z that is the cause . . .

While x is true, I would argue y because of z.

X was, in the past, the most important factor, but y has changed, making it the real cause.

A related approach is to give students strong statements on the board, overhead, or a handout—to respond to, in order to start the fire of discussion, such as:

- Video games are not a waste of time but a way of improving your mind. (English)
- We are *all* Hamlet. (Literature)
- The Great Depression was not a curse but, ultimately, a blessing. (Social Studies)
- Junk food should be outlawed in schools. (Health)

In response to such statements, students might choose from a list of sentence starters such as these:

- I agree that _____ but not that _____ because . . .
- X is true because . . .
- Some people think _____ about x , but I/others say _____ because . . .

No one prewriting method is perfect for all students. Instead, consider each strategy in light of your students' learning style and your specific assignments. At the heart of these suggestions, however, is the idea that writing requires not only a culture of support and inquiry but also the time and encouragement to fully engage in that inquiry. I am reminded of a cartoon I saw some years ago: A man reclines in a cabana on the beach, staring off through the window while a sign on the door warns: "Do Not Disturb—Writer at Work." We may not be able to provide the cabana or the beach, but we can—and should—provide students the time and opportunity writers need to think before they write. Given the different schedules all teachers have and the competing demands we struggle to meet in a given semester, it's hard to say what is enough time, but we should not expect good or engaged writing if we rush to get it done, making what should be a meaningful learning experience simply another assignment to check off as completed.