

PROMPTING KIDS TO WRITE

BY TRACI JOHNSON MATHENA

Crunch. Crinkle. Swoosh. Off the rim and on the floor.

"I messed up," says my student, looking at the paper ball near the wastebasket. "How am I supposed to start this thing, anyway?"

On numerous occasions, I've waded through the piles of balled-up theme paper and considered the plight of my student writers.

I know they have ideas because I've read their imaginative musings in notes I've confiscated. I know they can tell a story because I've listened to their lunchroom conversations, filled with detail and description. I know they can get their point across because I've mediated their arguments.

They communicate in those ways without self-consciousness.

So how do I get them to stop worrying *about* writing and just start *writing*?

Have you, too, pondered this as you absentmindedly toed a paper ball toward a wastebasket?

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At Canton Middle School, a full-inclusion school located in a working-class neighborhood in Baltimore, where nearly 90 percent of the students receive free or reduced-price lunch, we've found an answer to that question. It comes in the form of a strategy that uses a predictable formula, full-class modeling, and guided practice to move students easily—and with confidence—from a blank page to a decent, workable piece of writing. Although it started out as a way to get our students to pass the Maryland Writing Test (which definitely worked, as our 20-percent increase in pass-rate during the program's five-year span indicates), we also ended up with a dependable way to take the anxiety out of writing for our nervous novices.

"It enables the teacher to give students the feeling, 'I am a writer,'" says Nina Parish, Canton's language arts department head. She conceived the basis for the strategy in 1994 after attending a professional development session where the state-required writing test had been dissected and discussed. With modifications from our staff over the years, the process has become the core of our writing instruction and has given countless numbers of our middle school students one less thing to feel awkward about. "Once you change the mindset of the students so they feel more comfortable about writing," Parish says, "you can teach them to be better writers."

But before you can make them better writers, you have to get them to write. The students seem to fear what ap-

appears to be the permanence of writing: ink etched on paper in what they believe should be the perfect sentence, paragraph, or essay. So ideas ebb without ever really flowing, and partial sentences on crumpled paper represent what the student sees as the essence of his writing ability. That's the image we sought to change by giving our students the tools and the practice to bring their ideas to life on the page.

This strategy doesn't have a catchy name, but the kids catch on to "doing prompts," which is what they call this process which stems from analyzing prompts, or writing assignments that outline the topic for a piece of writing. Based on the premise that students learn best by seeing *and* doing, our strategy begins as a full-class activity where students complete a piece of writing following specified steps:

- Analyze a prompt, to determine the genre, or form, it is calling for; the intended reader, or audience; the topic; and the purpose—what the writer will be trying to accomplish: FAT P in our shorthand. (See Figure 1, page 20, for an example of a prompt.)
- Complete a "graphic organizer," a graphic version of the old-fashioned outline, especially designed to fit the particular type of writing. (See Figure 2, page 20, for an example of a graphic organizer.)
- Compose and edit a rough draft.
- Write a final draft.

At Canton, the language arts teachers introduce the narrative and explanatory forms of writing during the fall. In midwinter, we start teaching the persuasive form.

In the introductory lesson, the teacher, using a transparency of the assignment or notes on the chalkboard, leads the class through an analysis of a prompt. The students determine the various things they would need to consider in doing a piece of writing based on the prompt—we call these the "Think Abouts." After this, the teacher shows the class an example of a finished text based on this prompt, paying close attention to how the ideas in each Think About are developed into paragraphs.

Then the students are ready, as a class, to carry out a writing assignment. They begin by brainstorming and laying out ideas on a graphic organizer. Each Think About from the prompt becomes the heading on one section of the organizer, with the notes that pertain to it entered below. When the organizer is completed, the students, working with the teacher, turn the organizer notes into paragraphs. They also compose opening and closing sentences and they connect the ideas with time, or transitional, words. They even learn a foolproof topic sentence formula—the PAT topic sentence: *I am going to [insert Purpose] you [insert Audience] about [insert Topic].* (Not fancy, but much better than a blank page.)

The students copy the group-created organizer and essay from the overhead transparency where the teacher has been leading and working the entire time. Punctuation, spelling, grammar, and capitalization take a back seat (for now) to the *content* of the essay, since our state test does not grade these things. A full-class editing process follows the creation of the rough draft, and the teacher is able to model that strategy as well.

"The strength of the process is that you can get any kid to write," says Camille Basoco, a former Canton language arts teacher who now teaches high school English. "It is a great springboard for the kid who's scared to write, or who doesn't think he knows how."

"It gives them something to attack, something to hold on to. They know where to start, and I think that is pretty much the key," says Daryl Walsh, a language arts teacher at Canton for five years. "When it [the writing process] is broken down like that, students see it as a complete task; and they perceive it as within their reach."

Once the full-class simulation has been completed, students are given an assignment with a slightly different topic. They now carry out the process themselves, with teacher guidance only as needed. Students analyze the assignment, brainstorm, and use graphic organizers, many of which have been developed by our staff for explanatory and persuasive writing, as well as for the narrative writing with which students begin. (Later on, when they gain confidence, students develop and use their own organizers.) Once the student has transformed the notes on the organizer into the sentences of the rough draft, he has a basic, yet detailed and organized, piece of writing. Peer editing—where the students exchange papers and are taught to respond to others' work with useful feedback—and final draft writing complete the process.

"I find that students in general have so little idea of how to organize their writing or even how to approach the task that this is an essential first step," Daryl Walsh says. "It can—and maybe should—be reinforced ad nauseum. The more practice the better."

And practice is exactly what they get. After the language arts teacher introduces the first narrative essay and follows up with a second, the social studies teacher issues a narrative assignment based on that content. One social studies assignment had students writing a story about what it was like to be part of the expansion westward. Science and math teachers do the same when we introduce the explanatory essay. Science teachers assigned a prompt that asked students to explain the process one would use to test whether a water resource needed a "riparian forest buffer." Students become familiar and comfortable with the process in all areas, writing as many as three formal pieces using this process each month.

The Formula Comes First

"I think it is a really good way to teach kids to write," says Ian Armitage, a former Canton student who will begin high school in September. He says he feels confident that he can write about anything now. "It tells you everything you need to do."

The kids seem to agree with Ian. Although I have had to endure the sighs, sucking teeth, and rolling eyes of countless students after announcing that we were going to work on a writing prompt, the students say that the process gives them what they need—a place to start.

Jeremy Armitage (Ian's brother) started his first year in my class writing essays that sometimes scooted off on a tangent. "What really helped me was the organizer," says Jeremy, who will enter the seventh grade in the fall. "Sometimes when I would start writing about something, I

Breaking Away

In order to move forward, the students must make a break from the structure that has supported them and take some risks. The teacher's job is to provide them with the tools—more creative and daring writing skills—that will make their writing come alive. I start by taking that static, formulaic piece we created and teaching them to manipulate it. We vary the sentence structure, use punctuation to give the piece rhythm, diversify word choice—anything that will show them that once something is on the page, they, the writer, control the piece. My guarantee to them: *Once you get something on the paper, I can teach you to make it do what you want it to do . It will dance to the beat of your music .* It is then that my language arts classroom evolves into a writing community. Figurative language, sensory imagery, and literary allusions are some of the tools that fill the bag of tricks into which my students tentatively dig.

I find that teaching them to use their senses to invigorate their writing motivates and captivates them. My students had finished Martha Brooks' "What I Want To Be When I Grow Up," a short story about a boy who prepares for his future as a journalist by honing his observation skills during bus rides from his orthodontist appointments. In the story, the boy uses language to paint verbal pictures of people (the pork-chop man, pristine girl, and the suit person, for starters) and recount conversations and events that go on around him. From a writing standpoint, that's exactly where I wanted my students to go. So I took them there.

Armed with spiral notebooks and pens, we went out to the streets around our school to notice things—ordinary people doing ordinary things. In our spiral notebooks we had listed the five senses: sight, taste, touch, sound, and smell. We categorized what and who we observed, and we jotted down the immediate description that came to mind. Back in the classroom and under teacher guidance, the observations became the basis for simple sentences, and the descriptions were transformed into similes and metaphors. Put together, they became humorous and telling stories that my kids scrambled over one another to share. After other "Observation Outings," as we call them, students turned their notes into image-filled poetry, or

even short stories and plays.

Students practice various writing skills—using detail, handling sequence, and revising—with Passabout stories. After they all copy the same story opening into their spiral notebooks, each classmate adds to the page to continue the piece. Sometimes, this is done by passing the books. But most often, we do a kind of musical chairs in which students move by each desk while the music plays and add to the book at the place they end up when the music stops.

I found that both of these activities inspired my writing class this past summer—seventh- and eighth-grade students already indoctrinated into the Canton writing process. Although friends, back in their neighborhoods, were enjoying not being in school, these kids were serious and focused on their writing. Each student shaped his or her piece with care and precision, and they willingly offered and accepted criticism. Indeed, pride vibrated in each voice that asked, "Who's the next writer to share today?"

"Everyone wants to feel good about what they do," says Nina Parish. "And all a kid has to do is write a metaphor about which someone else in the class says 'Yeah—that's a good one!' and the student wants to do it again."

In moving beyond the basic process of doing prompts, my students and I have found that where once we listed, noted, and webbed, we now imagine, try to pick just the right word, and capture the energy of the experience in our writing. It's also where we edit for the things we missed before—the mechanics and grammar—in order to move beyond the final draft to publication—which means the presentation of the product to its intended audience.

The process we developed at my school is the first step to creating students who can write a simple but decent piece of prose. The next step shows them something about the art of writing and the tools they need to practice that art. But in the end, what really matters is getting the students past the anxiety presented by the blank page. If they can confidently put together a basic piece of writing, and later acquire the skills to develop it, they will grow into effective communicators and thinkers.

And think of the trees we will save. □