

## CHAPTER TWO

### *The Writing Process*

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**Poems written by Judy Phillips' students on display at the Cook Primary and Elementary School booth at the 2001 Exchange Club Fair. Photo by Diane Howard, 2001.**

This chapter discusses the writing process and the stages—pre-writing, drafting, revising, editing, and publishing.

#### **Becoming a Writing Teacher**

I have been teaching writing the past thirty years; however, I did not know how to teach writing until four years ago when I was first introduced to the writing theory texts of Peter Elbow, Donald Murray, Linda Flower, William Zinsser, and others who give more than lip service to the writing process. In their books and articles, these writing practitioners give detailed accounts of the steps of the writing process, complete with student work to illustrate the writing stages.

When I began emphasizing the stages or steps of the writing process to my students, I became a writing teacher and not simply a teacher who taught writing. There is a difference.

I realized this difference recently when I had the privilege of leading a reading and writing workshop for middle school teachers. A math teacher in this group had been one of my students in a high school composition 20 years ago. Throughout the weeklong workshop, I kept apologizing for the “error of my ways” of teaching when I sternly gave cold, canned, packaged writing assignments to her and her peers twenty years ago. I had been a product-oriented teacher of writing.

### **Process Not Product**

Now, I am a process-oriented writing teacher. No longer giving a writing assignment topic and collecting the five-paragraph essay product in 60 minutes, I now give a writing prompt, model the stages of writing process, and collect the written piece several days or even weeks later. I am teaching students how to write, not punishing them for not producing a “good” essay on the spot.

With my newfound approach to teaching writing, I no longer struggle to find just the right reader for my students. If I am to focus on teaching them how to write, I should not spend class time or their study time, for that matter, on reading an essay or story emphasizing my views or opinions. After all, the intent of a first-year composition course in college is to teach students about writing, not about abortion, gun control, euthanasia, global warming, or even education reform. The intent of the course is to teach students how to be better writers and better thinkers, not to tell them what to think. I believe that writing teachers should not brainwash their students.

Hence, teaching the writing process became my primary goal, by establishing an environment to stimulate students to think and to engage in the steps of writing needed to produce an essay, poem, play, newspaper article, advertisement, or document paper. I let the students write about what they know and what they care about: themselves and their families, friends, and neighbors. By not devoting precious class time to teaching a story or poem, I show them how to write. I model.

### **The Pre-Writing Stage**

With each writing unit, I begin by using class time to prepare the students for writing by taking them through a pre-writing stage. Sometimes I play music to set a tone or mood. Other times I use smells to prompt the students to remember. Frying bacon in an electric skillet is a great pre-writing activity to help students think about breakfast and an early morning event in their lives. Other times I have them close their eyes and take them to a place in their past as I talk to them softly about walking into a house, looking around the room, seeing a person, listening to that person, and replying to that person. Even a one-word prompt for a focused and fast freewriting is a helpful pre-writing activity.

### **The First Draft Stage**

Once the students select a topic during or following the pre-writing stage, they write a first draft, a “shitty first draft” as Anne Lamott calls it in *Bird by Bird*. I like using Lamott’s description because my students know I am not disappointed when their first attempts on paper are as bad as the aroma from skunks and three-day old dead fish. They know these attempts are only beginnings and they are willing to take risks and experiment with something new as they begin the essay or

poem or whatever genre they have chosen. I, too, write a first draft from the topic of my pre-writing activity.

Writing with my students accomplishes two things: it gives them a model of a person writing and an actual model of the stages of the writing process; it also gives me a greater understanding of what writing is all about. I identify with their anxieties, their fears, their frustrations, and their celebrations. It is amazing how much I learn about teaching writing from my students and from being a writer with my students. If teachers are to teach writing, they must be writers.

### **The Revision Stage**

Once we have written first drafts, we have something to revise. I like to teach revision in two stages. The first stage is for reshaping the piece; the second is for giving more details and for revising sentence structure.

To reshape their pieces, students re-read their drafts, asking tough questions about the beginning, the development of the paragraphs, and the ending. The order in which they present their ideas, as well as the development of their ideas, is important. A piece must be a complete unit.

Once the piece holds together as a unit, it must be fine-tuned. Each sentence and each word need to be considered for appropriateness. If details are omitted, they are added. Because the flow and the sound of words are important, hearing the language of the piece from an oral reading is important.

### **The Editing Stage\***

After revising, students are ready to edit the pieces. Peer and self-editing are helpful to most students. Mini-lessons on grammar and punctuation are incorporated into teaching the writing process at this time. I find that when I teach a grammatical concept and give an example of correcting an error, such as a pronoun-antecedent agreement error, and then have the students look at their own revisions for pronoun-antecedent agreement, they can spot errors in their own writing. The goal is to have students locate and correct errors on their own first, then help them avoid making these errors in the future. Spotting errors and counting off points are not my goals, and I do not count off points during the teaching process.

### **The Publishing Stage**

The final and most exciting stage is the publishing stage. This stage can take a variety of forms: a handwritten or printed piece submitted to me or read to the class; a piece uploaded on a Web page; a piece submitted to and printed in a newspaper or other publication; a piece printed in a collection or anthology; a poster or wall hanging; or any piece presented to an audience. Publishing is simply the act of presenting written work to an audience.

Since teaching the writing process and writing *with* the students, I have gained a new zeal for teaching—and for writing. All the lessons in this book of writing about folklife are written with the writing process in mind. The teachers who wrote these lessons and activities are teachers of writing also. They have a zeal for teaching and wish to share their successful writing lessons with other teachers.

**\*Checklists for the Editing Stage: Peer Editing Checklist; Editor's Checklist**

# Peer Editing Checklist

Name \_\_\_\_\_ Project \_\_\_\_\_

Peer Editor \_\_\_\_\_ Date \_\_\_\_\_

*Use this list to check your paper carefully.*

<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	My writing meets the requirements of the assignment.
<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	I read the paper for meaning.
<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	I checked the paper for complete sentences.
<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	I used correct principles of grammar.
<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	I used the spell check tool on the computer.
<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	I double-checked for correct spelling.
<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	All sentences start with a capital letter.
<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	Proper nouns are capitalized.
<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	The title has capital letters where needed.
<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	Each sentence ends with proper punctuation.
<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	Commas and quotation marks are used correctly.
<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	I followed the procedures of the writing process.
<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	I reread the paper carefully for all errors.

*(from Louisiana INTECH, a project of the Louisiana Department of Education based on the Georgia Framework for Integrating Technology in the Student-Centered Classroom. For the Georgia Virtual Learning Resource Bank see <http://www.teacherresourcebank.com/>).*

# Editor's Checklist

Name \_\_\_\_\_ Project \_\_\_\_\_

Date \_\_\_\_\_

*Computers cannot find all your mistakes. Carefully check your writing with this checklist.*

\_\_\_ I read the work for meaning. It makes sense.

\_\_\_ I checked the work for clear and complete sentences.

\_\_\_ I checked the spelling using the spell check tool on the computer.

\_\_\_ I read the work for correct word usage that the computer spell checker won't catch (to, too, two, they're, their, etc.).

\_\_\_ The first word in all sentences starts with a capital letter.

\_\_\_ Proper nouns that name a specific person, place, or thing have been capitalized.

\_\_\_ The title has capital letters where needed.

\_\_\_ Each sentence ends with a punctuation mark.

\_\_\_ Commas are used in any series of three or more things (apples, oranges, and pears).

\_\_\_ Commas connect the parts of compound sentences.

\_\_\_ Quotation marks begin and end words that someone says.

\_\_\_ I reread the document carefully for all errors.

Editor's signature \_\_\_\_\_

*(from Louisiana INTECH, a project of the Louisiana Department of Education based on the Georgia Framework for Integrating Technology in the Student-Centered Classroom. For the Georgia Virtual Learning Resource Bank see <http://www.teacherresourcebank.com/>).*