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Just Getting the Words Down on Paper: Results from the Five-Minute Writing Practice

M.E. Lamb

The “Writing Process” is a large concept encompassing many complex activities: inventing material, organizing it, aiming it to suit a particular audience and purpose, actually getting the material down on paper, revising the work. This essay will concentrate on the “Writing Process” in the most limited sense: what happens when the student actually writes, i.e. puts pencil to paper. Many students do not “write” well; that is, the process itself of putting words on paper is ineffective, creating errors in their grammar and, too often, dullness or even stupidity in their content. Giving them grammar drills, even talking out content, is often not enough. They complete the grammar drills competently and correctly, they tell you what they will write with engaging intelligence, but when they sit down to the paper itself, what emerges is often disappointing to them and to their teachers. In an attempt to deal with this frustrating problem, I have been working on the “Writing Process” itself by observing what students do as they write, and attempting to change what they do when their process of putting words down prevents them from achieving their potential.

There has already been some excellent work done in this area. Mina Shaughnessy has written with insight and verve about the composing processes of basic writers. One of her statements has particular relevance for what we have seen students do at SIU. According to Shaughnessy, a basic writer perceives a sentence as something like a train; once he/she has begun a sentence, he/she cannot go back and change the beginning, no matter how much trouble it gets the writer into.¹ This tendency appears in the writing of an SIU student: “In a town called Boondock, population of 60,000, is having a problem with the

military kids of Fort Folly.” The student began with “In a town,” and he did not perceive his option of crossing it out and beginning with “a town.” Perl and Pianko have described how poor or remedial students tend not to write “recursively”, as do experienced writers; that is, poor writers tend not to reread what they have written as they plan what to write next.² Their work gives us added information into Shaughnessy’s insight: if the student did not reread his sentence, he probably forgot that he had ever written an “in,” and what he remembered of the sentence would seem correct.

Several of my own inexperienced students write as if they saw their sentences as trains; worse, their sentences are often local trains, making many stops at jerky intervals. Here is an example of work produced by a student whose writing is plagued by fragments. (He does not have a fragment in these sentences, probably by luck.)

One of my favorite ~~hobbies~~ sports is fishing. When I fish I get a fantastic feeling of ~~happ~~ of pleasure. It is very relaxing but also

This work took the student 6 minutes to finish, largely because of his concern with word choice. Try this yourself. Take a pencil and paper and write “one of my favorite hobbies” then stop for 2 minutes and think, “Is fishing a hobby? or is it a sport? a hobby is something you do for pleasure, but you do sports for pleasure, too. Sports are competitive. But sometimes there are fishing contests, too. I saw a cover of *Sports Illustrated* with a fisherman on it...” (ad lib from there for the rest of the time.) Now, continuing...“is fishing. When I fish, I get a fantastic feeling of ~~happ~~” Now, stop for 2 minutes again and think: “Does fishing give me happiness or pleasure?”...“of pleasure. It is very relaxing but also” Here the process broke down entirely. After tracing “but” a few times, the student gave up entirely.

While the student stopped at intervals to consider his writing, his process was in no way “recursive.” He came to a dead stop where he sensed problems, and did not read the previous material he had written in order to make up his mind what to write next. This process is absolutely typical for students with a number of different problems: spelling, “-ed” and “s” dialect features, sentences; they all stop in the middle of their sentences to make their decisions right then and there. This process, ironically enough, produces additional errors because they lose track of the natural rhythms of their prose; and it also creates writing

governed primarily by a concern to avoid surface error. Shaughnessy describes a basic writer as moving across a mine field, hoping to reach the other side before an error “blows up” in his face. The task of writing becomes the task of avoiding error rather than the task of expressing oneself.

Here is another example of writing where the process has gone wrong. Try it yourself, stopping when directed.

the change to light beer

The message that is apart of our cultural and ~~social~~^{to} (stop for about 30 seconds and think what the message is to do—to push...) push forward, (stop and think how to get that “social” idea that you crossed out in again) social influences is to control weight. (“cultural” “social influences”—that’s great, just what he said in class.)

Today, people are more weight conscious and to show how the message will be projected (that’s nice) to the ~~audies~~ (stop; try to remember how to spell “audience”) Blue collar worker and ~~female~~^{to} (do females like beer? maybe not part of my audies...) people 18–36, who ~~is~~ (should it be is? or are? let’s see, “people is” “people are”—“are”) are also conscious of there weight. (whew, that may be a little long for a sentence—better stop it here). I will draw up an ad, ~~of~~ (I’ll describe the ad next paragraph—better stop it here), ~~through~~ (wow, something about the bear...damn) using posters and magazines. these ads will project (nice) anew slimer Hamm beer bear symbole, ~~that~~ (is a bear a that or a who? that or who, whom? no—that, but he wears a tee-shirt in some ads—and he fishes—better call him a who) Who would look to be more active in sport.

This is, if anything, understating the case. Many other ideas are also going through the writer’s mind besides the task at hand. He is concerned about getting a good grade on the paper, he is concerned about getting it done on time, possibly he is concerned about other pressures—finding time to study for that algebra test tomorrow. The comments included above are the kinds of comments students share when they explain why they have stopped. They portray a writer totally engaged with the material and decisions about his writing. Other thoughts (Oh damn when will I be done with this, I hate doing this, why do I have to do this) tend not to be shared and also interfere with the process.

How does a writer come to this process? The lack of recursive reading is undoubtedly linked to the failure to distinguish between the

spoken and written act. One cannot take back words one has said; one can only go on and make the best of it. When inexperienced writers do not look at what they have written before they plan what they will write, they are simply treating writing like speaking. This is why a sentence like “The message that is apart of our cultural and to push forward, social influences is to control weight” is quite possible for an inexperienced writer and impossible for a writer who naturally rereads while composing.

The other problem, stopping in the middle of a thought to pay attention to matters of spelling (“audiens”) or grammar (“who”) or “that”?), is at least partially teacher-induced. Filling out a teacher’s grammar drills gives us a common vocabulary in which to discuss these errors, but often a student’s heightened consciousness of fragments or other errors merely aggravates the problem. Here, for example, is a sample of writing from a student very concerned about fragments and comma splices.

Hot lines and the dishroom jobs at Grinnell are bad. (Hmmm. sounds complete. one verb “are” and “what are?” “hot lines and jobs” is subject. O.K., next one.) There are three hot lines open in the cafeteria. (“are” is verb. sounds OK) Working on the hot line is very hard work. (Boy, is it. Verb is “is.” “What is?” Working. OK) An employee is contantly standing and serving food. (Verb “is” again. What is? Employee. OK.) Working over hot lines can be very hot. (verb—“can”. what can? “lines.”OK.) Uniforms cause this because the material is heavy. (“because”—watch out. Do I have 2 sentence units? Uniforms cause this?—OK. “the material is heavy”—OK).

This is exactly the process we teach students when they correct sentences in a drill. They go over each example, one at a time, looking for verbs and subjects, marking them “F” for fragment or “RO” for “runon.” This student has applied that process, naturally enough, to her writing. The result is choppy and jerky in the extreme. What is unusual about this student’s writing is that it has worked on one level—she does not have any incorrect sentences, although her writing is stilted.

Usually students’ attention to error is intense but erratic. They will typically agonize over one decision about a verb ending, for example, and then ignore the next few. They sense, quite rightly, that it is time to get on with the rest of the work. The writing task, large enough for experienced writers, has simply become too big. They have to deal with everything—content, endings, sentences, spelling—in one draft, and

the results are predictably unsatisfactory. Their content is often shallow because their attention is diverted to spelling; their spelling is bad because they have been momentarily involved in what they are saying. In short, their writing is much worse than it has to be because they are doing everything at once.

The five-minute writing practice was designed to break down the student's task into smaller units. First, I sit by the student and watch him write to see to what extent the process is interfering with the result. Whenever the student stops writing, I ask him why and discuss the student's decision out loud with him. For example, when the student who wrote about fishing stopped to decide between "hobbies" and "sports," I talked to him about how he was making his choice. Next I try to divert the student's attention away from the problems which are interfering with the writing. I asked the student just to circle any words he wasn't sure about, and then to continue writing without stopping to make his decision then. This strategy works especially well for spelling and endings—the student just circles any suspicious-looking words and continues writing. When the student doesn't have to correct all of his errors on the first sitting, he can concentrate on content.

At first, I felt self-conscious, sitting there next to the student as he wrote. I was afraid the student would feel "observed." Actually, most students sense my sitting there as support. And, even if a student knows that looking up spelling words is interfering with his train of thought, he needs someone there to help him "kick the habit." Then, after a short period of time, whenever the student seems to be winding down, the student stops writing and reads it aloud, reacting to the writing as he reads. If the student sounds uneasy or stops and says "that's not right," I discuss his feelings about the writing at that point. After working with his initial reactions, I discuss content with the student. Is there anything he wants to add? and anything that doesn't seem right? Then, after the content seems satisfactory, the student proofreads it once for each kind of error he tends to make: maybe once for spelling, once for sentences, etc. By separating the "writing" process from the "revising" process, the student becomes more efficient at each.

You may be asking, "Why for 5 minutes? Why not for thirty?" I have found that several short practices are more efficient than a few long ones. I am trying to instill new habits of writing, and short practices enable me to say, "Yes, that's fine" or "Well, that's better, but you still stopped a lot to think about endings. Let's try it again, just thinking about what you want to say." And there isn't as much to correct, so the student doesn't get "bogged down" in correcting endings, etc. Writing and then reading short units also comes closer to the

maturer writer's recursive writing, although the student is cued to stop by the teacher rather than by his own sense that it is time to reread what he has written. Eventually, after discussing feelings about these small units of writing with the teacher before going on to the next piece of writing, the students begin to fall into a more recursive train of thought. After students master these 5-minute practices, they can go on to longer ones and apply what they have learned about their own process to writing full-length compositions.

The 5-minute writing practice is not, of course, a cure-all. Many students still need help with the other aspects of the Writing Process—inventing material, organizing, dealing with the values and priorities of academia. Some students already have a mature enough process so that they don't need this kind of practice. The 5-minute writing practice has perhaps benefited me as well as the students. In watching what students actually do when they write, I am reminded of the truly difficult task that our students, or any writers for that matter, face every time they put pen or pencil to paper. What seems so simple in the rhetoric books becomes so complex in practice. From this perspective, from the perspective of what writers actually do, writing is a new territory we are just beginning to map, and there is much still to be discovered.

FOOTNOTES

¹Mina Shaughnessy, *Errors and Expectations* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1977), esp. pp. 44–89.

²Sondra Perl, "The Composing Process of Unskilled College Writers," *Research in the Teaching of English*, 13 (1979), 317–336; Sharon Pianko, "A Description of the Composing Processes of College Freshman Writers," *Research in the Teaching of English*, 13 (1979), 5–22.