

# MORE PRACTICE, LESS TIME: A JOURNAL THAT WORKS!

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Perhaps the most difficult problem facing composition teachers is finding sufficient time to have each student do enough actual writing to allow for significant improvement. Classes are usually overcrowded and semesters are always short. Most course syllabi suggest working with “finished,” or “full-length” themes in several different modes, an instructional methodology that dates back to Aristotle. The dedicated instructor is asked to tunnel through eight or ten (to be optimistic) samples of each student’s writing before reaching, blurry-eyed, the moment of final evaluation — often a moment of truth for both student and instructor.

In addition to sending tired teachers of one or more such sections to the local optometrist for stronger lenses, this class format has many other disadvantages. Teachers of the “finished theme” class often feel dissatisfied and helpless when faced with the apparently minor gains their students make over the semester. In fact, they frequently feel obligated to assign a final grade based on effort rather than on the achievement of any real competence in writing. The students, too, sense the limitations and echo the dissatisfaction, as this student comment on a course evaluation form reflects:

Even though writing papers is a cumulative process, as a result of knowledge gained due to previous assignments, more reinforcement on a certain paper should have taken place . . . more than one of each paper written.

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Indeed, this student's suggestion, however impossible it might seem to overburdened composition teachers, is supported by much research that suggests that real writing improvement comes not from simply reading the essays of experienced writers, nor from obeying the dictates of a rhetoric or handbook, but from actively engaging in the writing process itself. In *The Development of Writing Abilities (11-18)*, James Britton and his research team explored the process whereby students acquire writing competence. They asserted "that children learn to write largely by writing," but they qualified the kind of writing by suggesting that "traditional rhetorical categories seem to suggest that ideal 'Platonic' compositions exist." Instead, their findings indicated that "When a writer wrote to satisfy himself as well as to fulfill the task, he seemed better able to bring the full force of his knowledge, attitudes and language experience to bear on the writing."<sup>1</sup>

This points to a further failing of the "finished theme" format. When teachers assign a set number of specifically structured themes, they often become the sole audience and the sole motivation for the writing that results. The "task" of writing becomes perfunctory and artificial. This approach ignores the personal, affective domain of language that is both a tool for self-awareness and a necessary prerequisite of the communicative and analytic uses of language.<sup>2</sup> Janet Emig, who has termed this personal, exploratory writing the "reflexive mode," argues for its inclusion in composition instruction:

The data strongly imply that changes need to be made in the way composition is taught . . . specifically, teachers of composition should themselves write in both the reflexive and the extensive mode so that when they teach, they are more likely to extend a wider range of writing invitations to their students.<sup>3</sup>

In view of this research, composition teachers are urged to add not only *more* writing practice, but *more varieties* of writing practice.

But the question remains: How can teachers already occupied with reading two or three hundred required themes per class section possibly assign and evaluate any more writing? They need a method for facilitating more writing in more forms without disrupting the traditional class format.

One solution is to assign a specially-structured class

journal in addition to the regular theme assignments. Adding a journal is by no means novel. In a 1975 issue of *College English* Michael Platt outlined some convincing reasons for students in all classes to write journals: as a vehicle for inquiry about reading material, as a preparation for class discussion, as a source for topics for papers, and as an avenue for forming friendships among students.<sup>4</sup> The introspective uses of the journal were examined in a 1977 article in *Media & Methods*, where G. Lynn Nelson equates journal writing with “survival writing” of the classroom.<sup>5</sup> In *Errors and Expectations*, Mina Shaughnessy recommends the journal as a form of “practice” that encourages the “flow of words . . . until the pen seems a natural extension of the hand, and the hand of the mind itself.”<sup>6</sup>

Yet those who have experimented with student journal writing know that the simple addition of diary-type journals to writing classes will not solve composition teachers’ problems. The diary-type journal does not solve the problem of allowing students more practice with the “certain papers” that plagued the student evaluator cited earlier. And alas, it does not minimize the evaluation time required of instructors. In fact, evaluation often becomes more oppressive as unsuspecting instructors wade through entry after entry describing the daily routines, cafeteria meals, and love lives of their now “personally-involved” students.

To be truly useful, the journal must be much more. A review of the journals of some experienced writers (a valuable exercise for students embarking on such a task) reveals the rich potentials of the journal form. From the journals of such writers as Thoreau, Bellow, or Vonnegut, a reader can deduce common elements of true journals. A journal is not simply a diary, although it does record daily impressions; it is a proving ground for ideas, a place to record observations, a reservoir for impressions, a playground for language, a scrimmage field for grammar and style, an examining table for values, a mirror for self-awareness — in short — a language experience.

Still, even with the journal thus defined at the outset, complete with examples and suggested entry topics, students eventually lapse into the “what I did today” entry. They become bored and need stimulation, as these students’ comments from evaluation forms suggest:

The journal was both a good and a bad idea. It was good when I felt like doing it, but it just seemed like

tedious busy-work when I was tired or in a bad mood.

The journal might be of more value if topics for the entries were suggested which would help in the writing of the next paper.

Without direction, most students' entries become routine. Their sentences become sloppy, their paragraphs non-existent, and their mode almost exclusively narrative. This "practice" may indeed become a "natural extension" of pen and hand, but too often without the important involvement of mind. In practicing this poor writing, the students are like basketball players shooting near hits to perfect missing the hoop. Their game just doesn't seem to improve.

Several years of experimentation with different journal assignments in both secondary and college classes have led to the "stimulatory" journal form that follows. It is based on several assumptions that seem to hold true.

1. For students to learn to write, they must exercise their writing.
2. This exercise program should encourage balance and development, with tasks aimed at various writing skills that feed into regular theme assignments.
3. To increase students' involvement in the tasks, they should be allowed to choose from topic stimuli or to initiate a self-designed task.
4. The teacher need not, and indeed should not, be the sole audience of such writing.
5. Correctness should be one goal of the journal, but it should not be a threatening (evaluative) aspect.

In my classes, the stimulatory journal is explained and assigned during the opening class sessions. Students are asked to write five dated entries per week, either on a topic of their own choosing or in response to one of my "stimulations." These "stimulations," or writing topics on loose leaf pages, are issued periodically to provide ideas and to offer practice that parallels skills or modes covered in class (Appendix A). The pages are kept in a ring binder to allow students to shuffle through, choose my topics or self-initiated writing according to their own desires, and still keep the journal in chronological order. Stimulations range from forming lists of details for comparison and contrast to role-playing consumer situations in letter writing to examining audience. Because students are free to choose, they receive a large dose of varied practice along with the opportunity to

become personally involved in what they write. When stuck for an idea, they complete one of my pages. When motivated by their own need to say something, they write an insightful, sincere entry of their own. They are thus encouraged to go beyond the narration of today's events and practice writing skills of all types.

To solve the problem of teacher evaluation time, the journals are graded or "checked" only five times during the semester, by me or by fellow classmates. I generally read the journals after a week or two and comment on successful entries. I try to keep this a positive feature. I add editorial comments, but deduct "points" only for missing entries. Any student who completes all daily writings receives the total possible points (usually equal, over the semester, to one major theme grade). After all, the real value comes from the student's writing, not my grading. The specific dates for journal checks are unannounced, so students must bring the journal to each class meeting or forfeit credit should a check occur. This helps guarantee that students do indeed practice a little each day and not a lot the night before grading. In my high school classes I often allowed time for journal writing at the beginning of the period since this helped quiet the students and get the class underway. In college, unannounced checks encourage daily attendance.

Fellow classmates make journal checks as the semester progresses. Research has shown peer evaluation to be an effective learning aid, and it is especially helpful for the less formal writing of the journal. Students are given forms to record their reactions and guide their evaluation (Appendix B). The forms ask the checker to make varying kinds of observations, such as reacting to an enjoyable passage, listing two or three well-constructed sentences, or identifying an ambiguous entry. Again, the student checker deducts points only for missing entries. At this point the interaction of the students is usually lively, but I stress *writing* reactions as further practice in bringing ideas out of the writer through the pen.

Because the students do not know at any given time if the writing will be read by the instructor or by a fellow student, their sense of audience becomes more realistic. They are not simply writing for an evaluator. It is important, though, that students understand from the outset that they will be reading each other's journals. The tears of a young woman in one of my early classes made this very clear. It

seems she was much more willing to tell her innermost secrets to me than to the young man sitting next to her. I now stress peer-grading when making the assignment, and I am much less frequently burdened with the pregnancy scares and drug problems I so helplessly read of in earlier classes. Although journals are used in therapy, this is not my intention, and I prefer a journal which more clearly suits the purpose of improved writing.

I find it a good idea to make the final journal check myself because many useful comments on the course and on the journal itself are entered during the final weeks of the course. The final check also gives me a chance to comment on the journal as a whole, a total of seventy or eighty exercises that help chart the student's writing development for the semester.

Because the stimulatory journal can easily be added to any existing class, it can be adapted to many needs. It is more than a workbook because it ultimately leads to personal involvement in a large quantity of writing. The possible stimulations, or topics, are unlimited. They elicit a variety of responses and also serve as models for the topics composed by the students themselves. Those students whose writing abilities seem to develop most tend to use the suggested topics at the beginning, often choosing their own ideas later in the semester. As the semester passes they become more willing to extend the range of skills in their self-initiated entries, sometimes creating topics that are so good I later add them to my stimulations. I often catch them practicing classification, definition, or persuasion as they set challenging writing tasks for themselves based on our regular class work. I've noticed marked improvement in focus and unity in their writing as the semester progresses. Students seem much more sure of what they will say from the first sentences of later entries. The stimulatory journal encourages this kind of independence by teaching writing — along with thinking — through the act of writing itself.

## APPENDIX A

### SAMPLE STIMULATION SHEETS with two students' responses

Date \_\_\_\_\_

#### COMPARISON

Choose two journal entries made in response to ideas of your own. Write a short comparison. You might compare the style, word choices, topics, or even how you felt the days you wrote them.

Comparison of: Date \_\_\_\_\_ & Date \_\_\_\_\_

Date \_\_\_\_\_

#### STYLE

Does advertising misuse our language? Richard Lanham claims it does:

Our society, then, offers no positive reinforcement (as the psychologists call it) to good prose, no negative to bad . . . The media, as one would expect, reflect and exacerbate the American attitude toward language. Words are to use. Advertising, in supplying plastic soul to the media, literally *uses up* words for profit. (*Style: An Anti-Textbook*, New Haven: Yale University Press, 1974, p. 8)

Look closely (or listen closely) to the advertising of today. List examples of words that are used to hide a meaning rather than to reveal a clear meaning.

Date \_\_\_\_\_

Add to this list *WORD PLAY*:

"I'm going to brain you," said the teacher.

"I wasn't there," she said absently.

"My pencil is dull," she said pointlessly.

1. "I haven't written anything yet," he said blankly.
2. "I'm only 4 feet 10 inches tall," he said shortly.
3. "I just powdered my nose," she said dully.
4. "I'm a light bulb salesman," he said brightly.
5. "The room is empty," he said vacantly.
6. "I like multiple choice tests," he said objectively.
7. "These new 2-ply trash bags are nice," she said gladly.
8. "That last word play was B-A-A-A-A-D," she said sheepishly.
9. "I live 430 miles away," he said distantly.
10. "I don't have any money," she said poorly.

Date \_\_\_\_\_

### POINT OF VIEW

Remember back to your earliest childhood memories. Choose one and try to travel back to that time. Let your mind recall as you record your story. Don't worry about form. Try to record as many details as possible as your senses experience them in memory.

As I let my mind wander over my past, one period of time keeps popping into mind. It's the year that I was in kindergarten. My teacher, Mrs. Kurshbaum, was great big, both in height and girth, and had taught my two older sisters. My name was Dickie, so I hung my coat in the coatroom under the picture of a yellow duck with a big D under him. Study time consisted of Dick, Jane, and Spot readers, learning the alphabet, counting, and little exercises to sharpen our minds. We painted in class too. Outside the classroom was a frame that displayed the picture of the week to the whole school. I had a picture in it once. It was a picture showing my sister helping some missionaries who came to our church hold up a big snake skin. When Christmas approached we made presents for our parents. For my mother I took a paper plate and stapled a little calendar to it and then colored the plate. Our fathers got a pair of slippers made of construction paper and colored. The best time was when I got home. My mother wasn't working then and she would meet me at the corner. When we got home we had lunch and played dominos. Sometimes when I'm over at the grade school now I look in my kindergarten room. Nothing has changed except for the carpet, and that now I can see from a bird's eye view.



## APPENDIX B

JOURNAL AUTHOR \_\_\_\_\_ JOURNAL CHECKER \_\_\_\_\_

JOURNAL CHECK # \_\_\_\_\_ DATE \_\_\_\_\_

MISSING ENTRIES (List dates) \_\_\_\_\_

### EVALUATION

1. Find an entry where the paragraph structure is especially well done.  
Date \_\_\_\_\_  
What order pattern is being used?
  
2. Find an entry that you found especially interesting in content.  
Date \_\_\_\_\_  
Suggest a way the author might expand this topic in a full-length essay.
  
3. Find three sentences that you think sound wordy or unclear. List them below and write a suggested revision for each.

POSSIBLE POINTS (20) *minus* (2) POINTS FOR EACH MISSING ENTRY  
= \_\_\_\_\_ TOTAL

### NOTES

<sup>1</sup>James Britton and others, *The Development of Writing Abilities (11-18)* (Great Britain: Macmillan Education Ltd., 1975), pp. 3, 5, 7.

<sup>2</sup>Charles J. Calitri, "A Structure for Teaching the Language Arts," *Harvard Educational Review*, pp. 481-83.

<sup>3</sup>Janet Emig, *The Composing Process of Twelfth Graders* (Urbana, Illinois: National Council of Teachers of English, 1971), p. 4.

<sup>4</sup>Michael D. Platt, "Writing Journals in Courses," *College English*, 37 (1975), 408-11.

<sup>5</sup>G. Lynn Nelson, "Teaching Survival Writing," *Media & Methods*, 14 (1977), 45.

<sup>6</sup>Mina P. Shaughnessy, *Errors & Expectations: A Guide for the Teacher of Basic Writing* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1977), p. 16.

