STUDENTS WRITE ON WRITING

The following three essays were presented at the third annual Indiana Teachers of Writing Conference, September 24 under the collective title "The Student Perspective." Popular demand necessitated publishing the essays in *JTW,* and undoubtedly readers will join the editor in congratulating these three students for the incisiveness and articulate quality of their work.

WRITING ANXIETY: EPIDEMIC IN THE COMPOSITION CLASSROOM

PAMELA BENNER

A serious malady exists in the composition class. It afflicts 99.9% of students at one time or another and manifests itself through pen chewing, bouts of crying, wadding of notebook paper, and colorful name-calling directed at composition teachers. What is this dreaded affliction? Writing Anxiety, the fear of writing. As a long-time sufferer, I began searching for its causes hoping to discover a cure. My research involved talking to other graphophobics about their difficulties, as well as reflecting upon my own experiences in writing classes. As a result, I have identified six major sources of writing anxiety; furthermore, I have discovered possible ways for teachers to help solve the problems stemming from these sources.

To begin with, lack of experience with certain rhetorical modes and writing for typical academic occasions may cause students to suffer. Teachers sometimes assume that students possess writing skills which neither they nor other teachers have taught the students. This situation seems ironic since teachers frequently justify their teaching strategies with the statement: "We're preparing you for junior high/senior high/college/graduate school," (the completion of which depends upon the level of the student). I know from my own experience that this is not always true. To illustrate, I graduated from Valparaiso High School,

which has recently been cited as one of the top sixty high schools in the nation. I mention this, not to boast about my alma mater, but rather to point out that a "good" student from a "good" school may not, upon entering college, fully understand how to write competently a research paper, a critical analysis, an explication, or an essay test. I didn't. One way to prevent this situation, I believe, is to implement vertical articulation into the curriculum. That is, educational systems should develop skills in a building process, whereby each level prepares students for the next level. This strategy would help to insure that students would, indeed, possess the skills they need for junior high/senior high/college/or graduate school.

Students of writing may face another difficulty — topic selection. Most students fear they lack the three elements which topic selection requires. First of all, students mistakenly feel a deficit in their resources needed for writing, protesting that they don't have anything interesting about which to write. Secondly, students may lack focus. They have trouble narrowing and expanding, always wondering how much is enough. Lastly, students often lack enthusiasm over suggested formats, and, as a result, they do not have the emotional commitment necessary for effective writing. Teachers can compensate for their students' insufficiencies by providing guidance during the writing process. Ideally, teachers should provide a balance of freedom and limits to help students select appealing and appropriate topics for composition.

A third cause of writing anxiety involves simply getting started. "Writer's block" has recently gained recognition as a valid complaint and not just a student excuse. The blank page poses problems for any writer; however, the student who possesses limited writing experience feels this intimidation more strongly than the seasoned writer. Those who share my perfectionist nature know the agony plunging into an assignment brings. Wanting everything flawless on the page, we perfectionists hesitate to write anything until we've clearly planned it in our minds. To get started in writing, students need "to get their feet wet." In other words, they need to ease into the writing process gradually, yet determinedly. Prewriting exercises such as free writing, brainstorming, and journal writing help students to begin their writing because these activities teach students that they can think and write at the same time, or, better yet, that they dis-

cover what they think through writing. When students realize they can do both things at once, they can more easily cope with writer's block.

If students cannot overcome troubles getting started, they may encounter yet another problem related to writing, procrastination. Again, this difficulty may be related to a student's perfectionist nature; students postpone writing because they believe that a better topic or a better way to say something will occur to them later. Unfortunately, "later" usually means the night before the writing assignment is due. While students need to learn self-discipline to avoid procrastinating, the teacher can help the students to help themselves by imposing artificial deadlines. To illustrate, the teacher may require students to hand in rough drafts for her approval a few days ahead of the final draft due date. This method would force students to begin working on their paper prior to the night before they have to turn in the final draft. As a result, students would be under less pressure to create. Neither the students nor their writing (nor the composition teacher, for that matter) would have to suffer the consequences of frantic last minute writing. They could spend the night before the due date revising the composition instead of composing the first draft. Unfortunately, revision proves difficult for the student writer, too.

Revision poses a problem for many students because they regard the process as something for those who failed in their first attempts. This negative attitude first develops in elementary school when teachers return a few unfortunate students' unacceptable work with the command, "DO OVER," marked at the top of the papers. In many secondary schools, the revision process becomes more elaborate as gross error lists determine whether or not a student has to re-write his or her paper. The term "gross error" seems to imply something lacking on the writer's part and, therefore, helps to reinforce students' resistance to revision. Teachers need to emphasize that revision improves writing; revision does not consist of simply correcting mechanical errors. Students need to realize that no piece of writing is ever finished; the process of revision allows a writer to change the shape of his work as much or as little as necessary. On one hand, writers may feel a sense of futility. On the other hand, writers can possess a sense of security in knowing that they can always re-work their writing, provided they are willing to do so. This willingness to add, delete, rearrange, and change

writing develops as students recognize revision as an essential step in writing, rather than regarding it as something the teacher imposes as remedial work.

While students encounter many difficulties prior to and during the writing process, they struggle with their greatest anxieties most likely after they have completed the process. They must cope with the evaluation of their written work. To illustrate the pain criticism can inflict on the student, an understanding teacher provided the following example for my high school composition class. A woman boards a plane with her beloved child. While in her seat, she notices the stares from a man sitting across the aisle. She assumes that he is noticing her child's good looks. When he approaches her, she assumes he intends to compliment her child. He speaks. "Ma'am, I don't think pets are allowed in this section. You'd better take your monkey to the baggage compartment."

Despite its lack of humor, this anecdote redeems itself through its value as an analogy. Specifically, the writer is the mother who feels emotionally tied to her child, the composition. The man on the plane and the teacher of writing share the role of critic, which requires empathy. The teacher needs to recognize students' abilities and limitations to avoid judging their writing too harshly. If teachers do not consider these issues, they may unwittingly harm their students' writing.

For instance, one of my composition teachers in junior high school greatly hindered my writing by making one small comment which demonstrated her failure to consider my level of sophistication. In writing a descriptive paragraph, "Bargain Day at the Dime Store," I used the phrase, "snotty-nosed brats," to create a vivid mental image. My teacher apparently found no humor in my description and criticized the phrase by writing in bold red letters: "This is not appropriate for formal composition." She did have a point. However, I think a more positive approach to the circumstances might have been suggesting alternative phrases which are acceptable for formal composition. This incident stifled my writing because my "child" had been mistaken for a monkey, and, naturally, I felt hurt. To avoid similar situations from happening in the writing class, students and teachers need to establish a sense of working together, instead of being at odds with one another. This rapport helps the student to accept criticism more willingly from his/her teacher and strive toward improving writing skills.

Helping students to overcome their fears concerning writing is no easy task. Both students and teachers must put forth effort so that the students can reach their full potential as writers. As poet Robert Louis Stevenson noted, " . . . to become what we are capable of becoming is the only end of life." Only when teachers and students strive together toward a common goal, what they are "capable of becoming," can they hope to promote successfully a vital skill — good writing.

Pamela Benner is a senior at Valparaiso University, majoring in English and minoring in secondary education. After receiving a Bachelor of Arts degree in May, she hopes to obtain a position teaching English at the junior high or senior high level.

THE HIGH SCHOOL STUDENT'S UNDERSTANDING

DEBORAH EPPERSON

As a high-school student, I have come in contact with some terrific writing teachers and some not-so-terrific writing teachers. But, after looking over all of the material they have taught me, I have discovered the writing process always divides into three steps. And, of these steps, the writing teacher only has true influence over the first and the last. The steps are: prewriting, writing, and rewriting.

Prewriting consists of all the little gimmicks we use to get the writing process started. It's the "mulling-over and pre-race jitters" stage. Actually placing the pen on the paper is often the most difficult part of writing. Writing is scary, and the average high school student is afraid to write. Part of the fear rests in the "teacher as a slavedriver" stereotype. But the other part is embodied in the question: How do I get started? Often the writing teacher promoted both fears with that first of the school year essay: What did you do over the summer? Tell me a little about yourself. The kids come out of this first class thinking, "I hope he likes what I wrote. I hate writing! I never know what to do!"

The first day of school might be more enjoyable if, for that first writing assignment, the students were just told to fill one or two pieces of paper with words. No essay — no story — JUST WORDS! And words in any order: lists, gossips, free verse, quips, ANYTHING! This would force the

student to place his pen on the paper and write, and it might help rid the student of his basic fear of writing.

The final step of the prewriting process is discovering a topic. We know we can write; we've got our pen on the paper; now what do we say? Ideas are a tough commodity to come by. They exist everywhere — but when the student sits down to find them — THE IDEAS DISAPPEAR! The brain is like a gun on "safety"; it won't shoot until it's placed on "fire." And, unless the student's brain follows direct orders, the brain must be tricked into thinking. I often make lists of the first ideas that come to mind. Somewhere along the line I'm bound to think of something to write about. Random searches in the dictionary may also produce a suitable topic. Almost any word can trigger the imagination.

Of course, in the prewriting stage it never hurts a teacher to offer suggestions. Perhaps the most effective way to help students conjure up ideas is to give them examples to work with. If the students are to write a sonnet, show them a sonnet. An example gives the writer a starting place. However, if the example sonnet is one of John Donne's "Holy Sonnets," the final results may be less than impressive. There is an art in finding the perfect example.

The second step in the writing process is the "actual" writing. This is when the student must confront the paper one-on-one. A little encouragement helps, but only the student can guide the pen. The rough draft has to be just that — a rough draft. The basic ideas can become secondary if the student tries too hard for style. The flow here has to be natural; there's no point in damming up the river. I've found while writing that if I cut short my natural writing burst before I've finished my rough draft, I just can't get back on the track again. It's content, not style, that matters here.

Once the student has finished the writing, the third and final step comes into play: rewriting. It is at this time that the student/teacher relationship is so important. But before the student takes the paper to the teacher, he should take care of some basic (and individual) rewriting steps. The grammar and spelling should be checked, and the mechanics tightened. In short, the student should do as much personal revising as seems possible.

Now the teacher has to take over and do her part. It's time to grade the paper! When I began to prepare this speech, I looked over my old English papers that I had in my dusty school drawer. I noticed two general trends in grading

that did not help my writing. On some of my papers teachers had penned in vast generalizations. At the top of these papers there was written the occasional remark — "good," "nice paper," "poorly thought out," etc. I've always liked to know that the teacher enjoyed my paper, but generalizations don't let me see what I've been doing right and wrong. And if I don't know what I've been doing right and wrong, it's hard to turn in effective papers. Pinpointing strong and weak points may make grading the papers take a little longer, but it's very necessary in the teaching of writing.

Perhaps more annoying than the problem of generalization is the problem of "lost objectivity." It is impossible to divorce personal opinion from the grading process entirely. However, a paper dealing with a subject one disapproves of is not necessarily a bad paper. Of course, this works in reverse. A paper on one's favorite topic may be a horrid example of writing. Regardless, objectivity is still the final goal.

Battling against bad grading habits are a few teaching methods that are good and helpful. All of these involve a closer student/teacher relationship. They place the burden of responsibility more equally on both the teacher and student. Many teachers do not want to go that far; it's arguably more difficult and time-consuming. But in the long run good teaching methods can only increase the writing potential of a student.

First things first: All grammar and punctuation errors have to be identified. Even if a paper is interesting, it won't communicate effectively if the grammar isn't "right." It's that simple as much as I'd like to deny it. The punishment system of grammar control is often the only way to push students into cleaning up the mess. If the teacher makes the students find and correct grammar errors, they'll probably avoid the same mistakes the next time (or at least they'll try).

Now it should be easier to find the stylistic weaknesses. Noting the places where the student is vague, marking unneeded changes in tense, and asking for subject definition are all valid requests when assisting the student. Once MY weaknesses are pinpointed I can go back and clean up. If the teacher remarks that I "have used too many colloquialisms for a formal essay," I have been notified as to what needs correcting. I can go back and tighten the paper; I can increase my control over the subject. I have found the most helpful remarks force me not only to REWRITE but also RE-

THINK. I have to look at my paper with a new pair of eyes — the eyes of the reader, the audience. If the remarks are short-sighted and superficial, expect my new vision to be myopic. Any student must be given tangible items to work with before a paper can be strengthened.

It is equally important to note the student writer's good points as well as his bad. By the teacher focusing on the good and stong points of a paper, the student can duplicate quality results. One of the most constructive comments a teacher has given me noted my control of my subject. The teacher also noted the places where my control was clearly evident. By pointing out this good point and by telling me WHY it was good, the teacher had given me an example for further expansion. Often it seems to me teachers are willing to be specific only with the bad points and weaknesses. But a major benefit in marking a student's strengths is that the student will enjoy his writing more. There is confidence in success.

The final step the student and teacher must take is that of reciprocation. It is vital that a dialogue be established between the two. Writing involves a giving and a receiving. So does the teaching of writing. The writing teacher must play the role of audience and critic. When I produce a paper and hand it in, the burden of expectation shifts to my teacher. I have given up my product, and the teacher has received it. In return, the teacher must give me her criticism which I must receive.

Unfortunately, many writing teachers refuse to establish an open relationship. There is a line of fear and false respect that develops between teacher and student. The student feels threatened by the teacher's power over his grade. The teacher feels threatened with the need to grade the paper honestly. So much CAN develop between teacher and student; the bond must exist for the teacher to truly teach. If I make an error while writing, the teacher has to help me find it. Once I find my mistake I rewrite — and again the teacher reviews. This circle may not, due to time limitations, be able to carry on for lengthy periods. But if both sides are open to work and change, almost anything can be accomplished.

I think the educational system doesn't realize the full writing potential of the high school student. I am always willing to write more if I have established an open relationship with my writing teacher. Give the student recognition and encouragement, and he will write more and will have greater

control of his subject. Consistency and quality are developed through DOING. By making comments, demanding the rewrite, and initiating the student/teacher dialogue, the teacher can directly influence the student by helping him to help himself.

Deborah Epperson is a senior at North Central High School and plans to attend Washington University where she will major in English literature. Her career plans involve technical and creative writing.

THE COLLABORATIVE WRITING ENVIRONMENT

JOE TOOLE

The collaborative learning method, a writing strategy whereby students learn through peer interaction, has allowed me to shake off the familiar malaise which once afflicted my writing process. The method has fostered subtle yet substantial changes in my basic approach to composition by providing a more natural writing environment than was found in my traditional-method writing courses. When I enrolled in a traditionally-taught writing course, the changes in my writing process were abruptly exposed. Having grown accustomed to frequent discussion and collaboration, I found myself again part of a silent crowd of students intently taking lecture notes. Now back writing in a collaborative learning environment, I am keenly aware of how the method has influenced both the perspective from which I write and the means by which I generate ideas for compositions.

The most important change in my writing approach results from the more concrete and comprehensible context provided by a collaborative setting. Rather than having to invent a context for writing, I am placed in an environment where rhetorical context, that is the purpose, audience, and occasion of my writing, assumes a dynamic character which I can readily observe and understand. My approach to writing is, therefore, more purposeful, more reader-oriented, and more appropriate for a given situation.

My purpose in a traditional writing setting was so narrow that my compositions were often stiff and stilted. I still

wince when recalling the unenlightening purposes of some of my old essays, which had titles such as "The Advantages of Pocket Kleenex." Fulfilling the assignment was my overriding concern; stimulating my reader of minimal importance, largely because I considered beyond my ability any attempts to entertain, persuade, or inform my teachers. Since communicating anything worthwhile to my reader seemed impossible, I settled for writing about mundane subjects and avoiding anything controversial or potentially difficult to write about.

In a collaborative setting my purpose expands and grows more reader-oriented. While composing I must constantly remember that my purpose is directed toward a group of readers that will judge my work on a variety of levels. Long before my paper is turned in for evaluation by my professor, it will be analyzed by fellow students, whose reactions often do more to shape the goals of my writing than any penciled-in teacher comment. For example, one student remarked while reading a paper relating my personal experiences with panhandlers that she felt saddened by the events in the story and believed she was actually learning something valuable from the paper. Another student commented while reading a paper describing my mother's tormented reactions to my struggles to play the banjo that she was touched by the close relationship between my mother and me that came through in the paper. These spontaneous reader reactions are not only satisfying for me as a writer, but show me poignantly how my purpose can be much more than simply avoiding red marks on my paper.

The audience component of rhetorical context was an illusory concept in my traditional writing courses. The average reader, for whom I was instructed to write, was a faceless, amorphous image in my mind. Much easier to conceptualize was the studious face of my instructor reading my paper. Therefore, I wrote solely for one person, my papers being secretive student-to-teacher transactions. I was so caught up in this approach that when my high school English teacher read my essay on Steinbeck's *The Pearl* aloud to the class, I felt that a professional confidence had somehow been violated. The one-person-audience approach is still valuable for essay tests in other than writing courses, where students must necessarily cater to the reading perspective of the professor, but in a writing course this ap-

proach obstructs development of a clear concept of my audience.

A collaborative setting removes this obstruction by providing a living audience — a diverse group of readers with whom I must communicate. My collaborative writing courses have gradually reshaped the view I have of my readers. My first college essay, entitled "The Excitement of Canoeing," was a tedious exercise in banality that my professor tactfully told me needed some "punching up," but only after hearing fellow students remark that my canoe trips were excrutiatingly dull did a sense of audience germinate in my thoughts. A few essays later, when a student reading my paper entitled "Expressions of Love" commented that he found the paper interesting and involving, the idea that I could capture another person's attention through writing began to sprout. On the first day of technical writing, my professor had each student brainstorm a topic for a long research paper, then announce the topic to the class, and allow each student to appraise his or her interest in the topic. My topic, improving worker productivity through wage incentive plans, at that moment died from a merciless lack of general interest, but a new concept blossomed in my writing strategy: an audience is a cluster of minds, not an assemblage of average readers. A collaborative setting exposes me to those many minds, thereby helping me develop an awareness of my audience during the composing process.

The occasion for which I write, the final component of rhetorical context, was a feature of my writing approach ingrained in meaningless habit. My traditional writing courses never violated the ritual of my paper being snatched up during class and digested later at some unknown time. The event of my compositions being read remained remote and obscure and had no place in my writing strategy.

When I bring my paper to class in a collaborative writing course, however, the progression of my composition from typewriter to teacher to tomb is interrupted. As I listen to fellow students read and discuss my work, I sense my prose coming to life in the mind of another person. My Expository Writing professor currently uses a technique I find particularly effective. Each student exchanges papers with another and reads the other's paper aloud to the author, making spontaneous remarks about the composition as the author silently takes notes. I jotted down the following notes

as one student performed this protocol using my paper about panhandlers:

fear or pity motivates giving to panhandlers
has never been stopped on street by panhandlers
feels sadness in first example
third paragraph held attention well
sentence beginning "After walking" awkward
sentence beginning "I answered" confusing
feels I am a sucker in the last example
interest held during last section
"garb" doesn't fit
wonders what panhandler will do with money I gave him
"drinking to my health" is humorous
topic is unusual
overall flow of paper good, holds interest

These brief comments provide a vivifying look at the internal dialogue my reader carries on. The sadness, confusion, curiosity, and amusement this reader experienced gave me valuable insight into the occasion which this paper was read. I gained an understanding of what actually happens when a person holds my writing up to her eyes and takes in the sentences and paragraphs I have so laboriously scrawled across the pages of my paper.

In addition to prompting changes in my approach to rhetorical context, the collaborative method promotes changes in the way I cultivate ideas. The method allows me to discover fellow students' thoughts and emotions for use in developing compositions. When I had difficulty narrowing the scope of my research for a paper on nonvoting, other students made suggestions, such as "find out what kind of people advocate nonvoting" and "see how education affects voting behavior." When I wondered how the word "nonvoting" would be interpreted by readers, the class offered individual definitions, such as "anti-Americanism" and "voter apathy." Of course, this type of interaction sometimes occurs in a traditionally-taught writing course, but the collaborative environment encourages frequent interaction, making creative interchange a comfortable, regular exercise.

The development of my essay concerning breakfast cereal commercials exemplifies the way this environment engenders creativity. The general idea for the paper began

with my interest in how advertising affects young children. As usual in my collaborative writing courses, the professor instigated a brief class discussion of each student's topic. From this discussion I discovered the following general points about my paper: some people distrust almost anything related to advertising or television; television commercials are often perceived as being insulting, degrading, or annoying; many people feel children are too strongly influenced by television. After reviewing this information, I decided to focus on breakfast cereal commercials, which seemed to bear the brunt of the criticism about commercials directed toward children. I discussed this more specific topic with a student who favored censorship of breakfast cereal commercials for children, and from this discussion, I decided to construct my paper as an argument against restrictions on cereal advertising. The first draft of the paper was then used in two interactive classroom exercises. The first, a reader-generated outline of my paper, showed me that the basic structure of my argument was sound. The second, a reader response to specific questions I had about my paper, showed me the weak and strong points in my argument. These exercises supplied information that helped determine the form and content of the final paper, which, although it was not totally persuasive, was at least well organized and meaningful.

Progressions of ideas such as this are a frequent outgrowth of the cooperation among students fostered by the collaborative setting. I now actively seek out others to help me view writing topics in fresh and enlightening ways — perspectives that make my approach to writing more imaginative and resourceful. Before beginning a case study write-up for my Operations Management course, for example, I met with two other students in the class for a two-hour discussion on the case. Each of us had a slightly different view of how the paper should be written, but collaborating allowed us to produce individual papers that were more comprehensive and inclusive than would have been possible otherwise.

By helping me understand and apply the concept of rhetorical context and by encouraging me to bring the ideas of others into my creative process, collaborative learning has forever changed my method of composing. The isolated approach which made writing an agonizing chore for me has given way to a vital new strategy. My approach is now more

in touch with my audience and more open to the thoughts and emotions of readers.

Joe Toole is a senior at IUPUI, majoring in business and minoring in writing.