

EVALUATING STUDENTS' WRITING: A PROCESS APPROACH

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Traditionally, the evaluation of student writing has focused exclusively on the end product. Teachers have evaluated their students' compositions with a happy face, letter grades, or corrections marked in red pen, and researchers have devised a variety of other methods to evaluate the final drafts of student writing. They have counted words and sentences to calculate T-unit scores and ranked papers analytically, holistically, and according to primary traits. These traditional practices and research methods are useful in judging the results of writing, but they neglect the process that students use as they compose.

In recent years, the teaching of composition has been revolutionized by a shift in emphasis from product to process (Hairston). In the process approach, children learn to write by developing and refining a piece of writing. Authorities in the field of composition, including Donald Murray (1968; 1972; 1978), Janet Emig, Peter Elbow, Donald Graves (1975; 1983), James Britton, and Nancy Sommers have identified the stages of the writing process. The names of these stages vary, but fall generally into the categories of prewriting, drafting, revising, editing, and publishing.

Evaluation should now be redefined to take into account this process approach to the teaching of writing. Evaluation should no longer be merely the last step of the writing process; it should be ongoing and integrated into the entire writing experience. As teachers observe and confer with students

during each stage of the writing process, they have the opportunity to evaluate what students do as they write. In this integrated approach to evaluation, teachers evaluate whether or not students are utilizing specific writing process behaviors as they write, for example, writing a series of drafts rather than a single draft of their compositions. The purpose of this article is to demonstrate how the integrated approach works at each stage of the writing process and to present a checklist (see Appendix) which teachers can use to assess whether or not their students use specific behaviors of the writing process as they compose.

Prewriting

The first considerations students face as they prepare to write involve purpose and audience. Students need to know why and for whom they are writing. These considerations will influence the decisions that students make throughout the writing process, in drafting, revising, editing, and publishing. For as James Kinneavy points out, purpose is all important, affecting everything else in the process of writing. He lists four general purposes for writing: (1) expression as in diaries and journals; (2) persuasion as when students write invitations urging parents to attend a PTA meeting; (3) information as in a report on a scientific experiment or observation, or directions on how to do something; and (4) literature as when students write stories, jokes, poems, and plays. Kinneavy warns that "no use of language is superior to any other. . . . Each achieves a different *and* valid purpose" (66). Thus teachers should provide opportunities for students to write for each of these purposes.

Another important dimension of students' writing development is their awareness of audience. Britton, Burgess, Martin, McLeod, and Rosen describe audience awareness as "the ability to make adjustments and choices in writing which take into account the audience for whom the writing is intended" (58). Francis Christensen also emphasizes the importance of audience, explaining that writing without a sense of audience is self-expression while writing for an audience is communication.

Too often teachers are the only audience to receive students' writing. Britton and his colleagues found that 95% of student writing was directed to teachers only. The range of possible audiences is much broader. They suggest that possible audiences include self, teacher, wider but known audi-

ence, and unknown audiences. Wider, known audiences could include classmates, relatives, and favorite authors. Unknown audiences might include mail order companies and literary magazines.

Like Britton, James Moffett believes writing should move from closer audiences, such as self, to those farther away, both physically and emotionally. He believes such writing helps children move from egocentrism toward maturity, as they take more and more into consideration the needs of their audience.

Audience and purpose interact: as either of these changes, the same writing assignment will be written differently. Frank Smith uses the term “register” to describe the different forms or ways of using language. For example, he explains that a letter to one’s aunt is written in a very different way than a letter to a banker, even if the purpose of both letters is to ask for a loan. As children prepare to write, they must choose an appropriate form or register for their composition based on their analysis of the audience and purpose.

To examine students’ understanding of purpose and audience, two key features of prewriting, four questions were developed for the evaluation checklist:

- Can students identify the specific audience to whom they will write?
- Does this awareness affect the choices students make as they write?
- Can students identify the purpose of the writing activity?
- Do students vary the register according to the purpose?

During the prewriting stage, students must also decide on their topics and develop ideas about them. Students should select their own topics for writing because meaningful writing grows out of children’s experiences. A variety of activities can be used to help students prepare for writing. Graves calls these activities “rehearsal activities,” and they can take many different forms including brainstorming, reading, drawing, talking, note-taking, clustering (drawing a rough diagram of the ideas to be covered), thinking, and even writing.

These two additional key features of the prewriting stage, choosing a topic and rehearsal activities, are reflected on the checklist in the following two questions:

- Do students write on topics that grow out of their own experiences?
- Do students engage in rehearsal activities before writing?

Drafting

In the process approach to writing, students write and refine their compositions through a series of drafts. Students should use the first, rough drafts to pour out and shape their ideas, with little concern about spelling, punctuation and other mechanical errors. As Lucy McCormick Calkins advises, children must “make it messy to make it clear.”

Students do not begin writing their first drafts with the composition complete in their minds. They begin, instead, with preliminary ideas which they developed through the rehearsal activities. Through writing, rewriting, and more rewriting, students discover what they have to say. Murray (1978, 87) calls these first drafts “discovery drafts” in which “writers use language as a tool of exploration to see beyond what they know.” Elbow further explains the process of discovery writing:

Only at the end will you know what you want to say or the words you want to say it with. You should expect yourself to end up somewhere different from where you started. Meaning is not what you start out with but what you end up with. (150)

The goal of the drafting stage is that students develop their ideas, the content of the compositions. During this stage, children write quickly to keep pace with their thinking, and they often use invented spelling, and neglect punctuation, capitalization, and other mechanical conventions. As they write and rewrite, students often need to delete sections of text, add others, and rearrange them. In order to do this without recopying the entire piece, children should be encouraged to draw arrows to move text, to cross out deleted sections, and to cut apart and tape sections together to rearrange text. Teachers should ignore the messiness of this stage, because later during editing, students clean up mechanical errors, and during publishing, they put the composition into a neat, final form.

Too early an emphasis on editing in the writing process often has a detrimental effect on children’s writing. When children focus their attention on correct spelling, neatness

and other mechanical considerations, they may neglect the content of their compositions. Elbow explains that “the habit of compulsive, premature editing doesn’t just make writing hard. It also makes writing dead” (6). Teachers play an important role in drafting by allowing children to focus on content rather than mechanics.

Teachers also participate in the revision conferences, and their role is similar to that of the students. Sommers cautions teachers not to point out mechanical problems during the drafting stage in order to avoid sending students a false message about the relative importance of correctness. She also points out that teachers’ efforts in correcting mechanical errors in rough drafts are often wasted because of the changes and deletions that students make in succeeding drafts.

There are two key features in the drafting stage: the use of rough drafts and the emphasis of content over mechanics. Two questions on the checklist address these features:

- Do students write rough drafts?
- Do students place a greater emphasis on content than on mechanics in the rough drafts?

Revising

In schools, revising has been the most neglected stage of the writing process, often involving merely proofreading or editing. But experienced writers, those we would like our students to emulate, consider revising the most exciting and productive stage of writing. Neil Simon tells us:

Rewriting is when playwriting really gets to be fun. . . . In baseball you only get three swings and you’re out. In rewriting, you get almost as many swings as you want and you know, sooner or later, you’ll hit the ball. (Murray, 85)

Experienced writers always write with an audience in mind. They need to know how their readers react, and they make changes during revision to meet their readers’ needs. Elbow reminds us that “Writing is not just getting things down on paper, it is getting things inside someone else’s head” (76). During the writing process, conferences are the best way to obtain reader reactions.

Revision conferences may involve the whole class, small groups, or individual students. During these conferences, students read their compositions to their classmates, who then react to the writing. A good response is for students to tell first

what they liked best about the piece, and next what they thought was the main point. Then they can ask questions about points that were unclear (e.g., Why did he go in the cave if he was afraid?) or about material they would like to see expanded (e.g., What happened when Jamie opened her birthday presents?). Authors should also ask questions to discover reader response (e.g., Did you understand why Becky lied to her mother?) and to receive ideas about how to solve problems (e.g., How can I show that the kids don't like Jennifer?).

Teachers also participate in the revision conferences, and their role is similar to that of the students. Sommers suggests that teachers help students understand the purpose of revision by responding "as any reader would, registering questions, reflecting befuddlement, and noting places where we are puzzled about the meaning . . ." (155). The emphasis should remain on the content of the writing, with attention to mechanical errors postponed until the editing stage.

After the conference, students sift through the feedback they received and decide what changes to make in their compositions. The final choice as to which comments and suggestions are most useful and should be incorporated into their revisions always rests with the authors. Some students make these needed changes and then feel they are ready to move on to the next stage, editing. Other students share their revised drafts in another conference for more feedback about how well they are communicating. They should be encouraged to repeat the draft-revise cycle until they are satisfied with the content of their writing.

Experienced writers, Sommers reports, see the entire writing process as repeated cycles through all the stages, with the gathering of ideas and information (prewriting), drafting, and revision recurring throughout the composing process. For experienced writers, revision is not just "cleaning up"; it means adding material or rearranging. The drafting stage helps them discover what they want to say; the revision stage helps them find the structure or the most appropriate form and then develop it fully, keeping in mind the needs of their audience. Less experienced writers, however, still think of revision as primarily cleaning up, in which they cross out a word and substitute a better one. During revision, they do not rearrange or add material. In other words, they reduce the revising stage to a concentration on single words, or, at most, sentences, and move directly into editing.

The checklist questions for this stage ask whether students are beginning to use the revision strategies which experienced writers find most productive. Four questions concern the two key features of this stage, students' participation in conferences and their willingness to make substantive changes in their writing:

- Do students share their writing in conferences?
- Do students participate in discussions about classmates' writing?
- In revising, do students make changes to reflect the reactions and comments of both teacher and classmates?
- Between first and final drafts, do students make substantive or only minor changes?

Editing

In the editing stage, teachers and students work together to polish the writing by correcting spelling, usage, punctuation, and other mechanical errors. Teachers function as editors for students, helping them locate and correct their errors. Smith explains that "the aim of editing is not to change the text but to make what is there optimally readable" (127). Children care that their writing is "optimally readable" when they are planning to share their writing with a genuine audience. Otherwise, they often view editing as a boring and unnecessary part of writing.

Editing begins with proofreading. Children should proofread their writing and then have a classmate proofread it before going to the teacher for assistance. Graves (1983) suggests that as children proofread, they should mark places in their compositions where they think words might be misspelled, punctuation marks might be needed, and language might not sound exactly right. Students begin to assume responsibility for editing their compositions when they carefully proofread their own writing and collaborate with classmates to proofread each other's compositions.

It is unrealistic to expect students to be able to identify and correct all of the mechanical errors in their compositions. The teacher's role is to help students correct the remaining errors. Teachers provide two types of assistance. First, they work cooperatively with students to correct some of the remaining errors, usually focusing on one or more categories of error (e.g., using quotation marks to indicate dialogue). As they correct these errors, teachers also quickly review the skill

with the students. Teachers should limit the number of errors or categories of error they point out in a piece of writing in order to not overwhelm students. Teachers have additional opportunities to work with students on other errors as they edit succeeding compositions. Second, teachers simply correct the remaining errors for the students.

As students gain experience using the process approach, they should gradually assume greater responsibility for editing their own compositions. Shaughnessy suggests that students be encouraged to analyze and classify their mechanical errors into categories and then work to eliminate particular categories of error in their compositions. This is an important procedure because students often find that a large number of errors reflect only a few problem areas.

The key feature of editing, that students increasingly assume responsibility for identifying and correcting errors in their compositions, is reflected in the three checklist questions which cover the editing stage:

- Do students proofread their own papers?
- Do students help proofread classmates' papers?
- Do students increasingly identify their mechanical errors?

Publishing

The last stage of the writing process involves publishing the final product and sharing it with an appropriate audience. Publication can take many forms, depending on the audience to whom the composition is directed. Publication may be oral, visual, or written. Oral forms include reading the composition aloud, tape recording it, and readers' theater. Visual forms include creative dramatics, puppet shows, and filmstrips. The most commonly used forms of publication are written; they include booklets, letters, newspapers, and anthologies.

After the writing is published or put into final form, it should be shared with an appropriate audience. In the product approach to writing, teachers were often the only audience to receive student writing, and they often were a poor audience because of their preoccupation with correcting mechanical errors. In contrast, the process approach necessitates that students have a genuine audience with whom to share their writing. Students can then evaluate the effectiveness of their own writing after receiving the reaction of the audience.

When teachers use the process approach, they no longer need to receive student writing to read and evaluate during the publishing stage because they have worked with the students as they drafted, revised, and edited their writing. In this way, teachers are able to provide input to students about their writing while it is still in progress, at a time when students can benefit most from teachers' comments and suggestions.

The two key features of this final stage are publishing and sharing. Two questions on the checklist examine these features:

- Do students publish their writing in an appropriate form?
- Do students share this finished writing with an appropriate audience?

Using the Checklist

The questions developed from the key features in each stage of the writing process were compiled to form the Integrated Evaluation Checklist. This checklist can be used with students at any grade level who are learning to write using the process approach.

The checklist is designed to allow teachers to quickly assess their students' performance on specific writing process behaviors. Teachers can collect the information necessary to score the checklist as they normally observe and confer with students during writing activities. Thus, scoring the checklist should not place additional demands on teachers. The following procedure should be used to score the checklist: (1) identify a small group of students to be evaluated; (2) observe and confer with these students as they compose; (3) as students complete each stage, answer the checklist questions about that stage; (4) repeat steps 2 and 3 for each stage of the writing process; and (5) repeat the entire procedure with the remaining groups of students during other writing assignments. The evaluation should be administered periodically through the school year. In addition, teachers may ask students to evaluate their own progress using the checklist.

The questions on the checklist were formulated so that they could be answered with "yes" or "no" in order to simplify the evaluation. While the information gained with yes/no questions is limited, the checklist can be supplemented by teacher observations and anecdotal records.

The seventeen questions on the checklist describe the behaviors of experienced writers, and it is unrealistic to

expect students who are inexperienced writers to exhibit all of them. What is important is that students learn to incorporate more and more of the behaviors as they write. Naturally, students with less experience using the process approach will exhibit fewer of the behaviors. After several assessments, patterns of growth as well as problem areas will be evident. Then teachers can work with students on these problem areas.

Conclusion

The way elementary students' writing is evaluated must change to reflect the new process approach to writing. Teachers should no longer focus their evaluation on the product. Of far greater importance is students' ability to move effectively through the stages of the writing process, and it is this ability upon which teachers should focus their assessment. The Integrated Evaluation Checklist is one tool teachers can use in evaluating how well students incorporate specific writing process behaviors as they compose. Evaluation is, after all, not the end of teaching writing; it is only a means to achieve that end.

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APPENDIX

INTEGRATED EVALUATION CHECKLIST

Student _____									
Prewriting									
Can the student identify the specific audience to whom he/she will write?									
Does this awareness affect the choices the student makes as he/she writes?									
Can the student identify the purpose of the writing activity?									
Does the student vary the register according to the purpose?									
Does the student write on a topic that grows out of his/her own experience?									
Does the student engage in rehearsal activities before writing?									
Drafting									
Does the student write rough drafts?									
Does the student place a greater emphasis on content than on mechanics in the rough drafts?									
Revising									
Does the student share his/her writing in conferences?									
Does the student participate in discussions about classmates' writing?									
In revising, does the student make changes to reflect the reactions and comments of both teacher and classmates?									
Between first and final drafts, does the student make substantive or only minor changes?									
Editing									
Does the student proofread his/her own papers?									
Does the student help proofread classmates' papers?									
Does the student increasingly identify his/her mechanical errors?									
Publishing									
Does the student publish his/her writing in an appropriate form?									
Does the student share this finished writing with an appropriate audience?									

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