

DRAW: A HEURISTIC FOR EXPRESSIVE WRITING

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Over the past decade, college composition teachers have been offered a veritable smorgasbord of heuristics for invention: looping, cubing, tagmemics, dialoging, and a host of others. Each of these has its own strengths and weaknesses; that all have some merit is no longer seriously debated. The invention techniques commonly discussed in the journals and modern textbooks do generate ideas, as well as suggesting some means of supporting and developing those ideas. But for the freshman English teacher who wishes to focus class time on creative or descriptive writing, the available heuristics are in many ways inadequate. What is needed in the prewriting of expressive prose is more than mere generation of ideas--the idea itself often takes a back seat to the expressiveness of the language in which it is phrased. What is needed is a heuristic that is first and foremost generative of specific and vivid phrasing, that draws on the right hemisphere of the brain not for creative support of the essay stewing in the left, but for the substance of the writing itself. I would like to suggest DRAW (Delineate, Ruminare, Analogize, and Write) as such a method.

Just as the artist with his sketchbook devises the best way of portraying an object by making two or three preliminary sketches from different perspectives, so can the writer find the most artistic angle of approach to his subject. DRAW is a method designed to let the writer take any element of a creative work--a character, a scene, a head of cabbage, or whatever--and look at that element in a fresh, descriptive way. There are some shortcomings to this method: it is not particularly helpful in generating plot or suggesting organization; it may have to be repeated several times during the prewriting stage, or even during subsequent drafts; it may tend to generate overly descriptive, almost purple, prose. These shortcomings are easily conquered ones. Organization and editing are provinces of the left hemisphere and are best left undisturbed until after prewriting has been accomplished. The repetition of the process is quick and

painless and solely at the discretion of the individual writer. Why repetition may be desired--and perhaps this is DRAW's greatest weakness--is that this heuristic is one which requires a subject for examination, a starting point for the prose to come. But then, the artist cannot paint a landscape or the portrait of a lady without first examining his subject. Even the most abstract artists begin with some idea or concept which they wish to transmute into visual image; so too must the creative writer first identify his subject of expression before he can begin to DRAW.

Once the subject is identified (it might be anything from the interior of a doghouse to the major events of a character's formative years), the first step is to Delineate the subject, that is, to make a list of attributes. The writer should list specific facts about the subject as quickly as he can think of them, the more the better. Because of the way the list will be used in a later step, it should be kept on ruled paper, and every other line should be skipped. It is helpful to approach this step as a detective, to describe the subject as a police report would an escaped convict. What are the physical attributes? Any distinguishing characteristics? Any known habits or habitats?

As an example, I have Delineated the attributes of a common subject of freshman narrative: the beach. The following list was made in pencil, on a single page of legal pad, in about five minute's time.

Beaches are different.
Some are rocky.
Some have more shells.
The waves can be small or big.
A beach on a gray day looks sad.
There is a smell of coconut oil.
Sometimes you can smell dried seaweed.
I have watched an upside-down crab wash back and forth.
One can hear gulls crying out.
Children build castles and bury parents.
Men and dogs play frisbee.
Sunrises and sunsets are prettier at the beach.
Old men seem to surf-fish more than younger men.
It is fun to stand in a shallow receding wave and feel the water being sucked out around your feet.
You are always a little surprised when you realize that you are starting to burn.

When the list is about as long as above, say a page or two, the writer should put down his pencil and begin to Ruminare, to chew over the list he has just made. He should read each item and consider it carefully. Does it suggest a visual image of the subject? Does it really describe the subject? What kind of things does this suggest

about the subject? This stage of the process is primarily a mental one, and it should be remembered that its focus is an exactness of vision.

The next step is for the writer to Analogize the items on his list. For each item, the writer should come up with some thing, idea, or image which suggests the item in an unusual or creative fashion. This analogy should be written below the item in the space left when this list was made, and should be written in a different color of ink or other contrasting medium. The writer should let his mind make whatever associations it wishes; no connection is too obscure or silly. If he has trouble with any one item, he should go on to the next. Using my beach list above, here is what I came up with:

Beaches are different.

The coastline was as varied as a woman's wardrobe.

Some are rocky.

Rocks pierced the jagged water like dull knives.

Some have more shells.

The tiny shells cracked under my feet like brittle porcelain.

The waves can be small or big.

The little waves marched steadily forward, their rank and file periodically disrupted by great surges.

A beach on a gray day looks sad.

The low clouds hanging over the beach suggested viking funerals and doomed ships.

There is a smell of coconut oil.

The smell of the Coppertone I spread over her back made me think of some new, exotic ice cream.

Sometimes you can smell dried seaweed.

The beards of seaweed hanging down the beach smelled of old soup.

I have watched an upside-down crab wash back and forth.

The bleached body danced gently, gracefully in the current with its partner, death.

One can hear gulls crying out.

They screeched like fingernails down a blackboard.

Children build castles and bury parents.

The city survived the attack of the giant bottlecaps, but perished to the stomping of the young Godzilla.

Men and dogs play frisbee.

The black lab looked puzzled by the drowned seagull, but swam on to retrieve the frisbee.

Sunrises and sunsets are prettier at the beach.

The sunset was rosy as the inside of a conch.

Old men seem to surf-fish more than younger men.

The old man cast his line far into the eastern surf, as if trying to pull new days up over the horizon.

It is fun to stand in a shallow receding wave and feel the water being

sucked out around your feet.

You are always a little surprised when you realize that you are starting to burn.

The hot car seat thrust a thousand needles into her sunburned skin.

The final stage of the drawing process is to Write, to create descriptive sentences which make use of the analogies. In this stage the writer ignores the fact that the sentences may be unrelated to each other or the writer's intended message; they may be completely unrelated to the subject matter. The idea is to come up with phrases and clauses which are little pieces of art in and of themselves. Different items from the list may be combined or contrasted. It might be helpful to phrase some of the sentences according to Christensen's cumulative sentence method, or to one of the other methods of sentence combination.

As I prepared to work my beach example through the Writing stage, I noticed that several of my analogies seemed to suggest sadness and desolation. I decided to play with those analogies in a little narrative, just to see what would happen:

I walked aimlessly down the gray, empty beach, staring out at the low clouds, thinking of viking funerals and doomed ships. Tiny shells cracked like porcelain beneath my feet. A gull screeched angrily overhead, its cry a fingernail dragged over slate. I paused at a place where the gray water dashed itself onto granite boulders. The rocks pierced the crashing waves like dull knives.

I saw a flash of white in a little pool; it was a dying crab, belly up, swaying gently in the pool's diminished current. I watched it for some time. Its moves were perfect, graceful as it danced across the pool with its partner, death. A year before, I would have picked it up and shown it to Sara, who would have run screaming down the beach. I thought of how I would have chased her and thrown the crab, of how she would have turned to pound my chest with her little fists, and of how she would have accepted my apologetic kisses. I smashed the crab with a rock, and walked on.

. . . and so on. If I had found that I did not like the way this stage was progressing, I could have easily abandoned these two paragraphs and created sentences with some of the less dour analogies, until something else suggested itself. **What** is written in the final step of the DRAWing process is not nearly so important as **that something is written**.

When all four steps have been completed, the writer will find that he now possesses a vivid mental picture of his subject. He has

begun to think of the subject in a way that encourages creative insight and clearness of expression, the two mainstays of literary effort. He may have created some of the phrasing he will use in the body of his text, or he may have suggested the path his text should follow to remain true to the subject's characteristics. In short, he has now seen his subject from all sides--he can now knowledgeably choose the best profile and proper light for its literary portrait.

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