

# IF IT ISN'T A DIALOG, IT ISN'T COMMUNICATION

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I used to think that grading a paper had larger than life overtones, that I was there to preserve the sanctity of learning and logic against the threats of slovenly scholarship. I depersonalized myself, became the defender of my muse, and did battle with the infidel. With a clearer understanding of process writing and its stages, I came to give certain kinds of instruction and certain kinds of response at more appropriate times. Still, I used terms like “closure” and “publish,” referring to what I believed to be an end point, the time when the process ended and all that remained was product.

Now, even though papers do come in for a final grade or for publication, I feel that the process is still in motion and that the writer's growth can be kept in motion by dialog. When the writer makes the transition from writer-based prose, the real essence of writing begins: communication. But to assume that written communication is a one way street is wrong, because if it isn't a dialog, it isn't communication.

Teachers of process writing engage the writer in dialog early on. Much prewriting is done through class discussion, group brainstorming, and shared freewrites. Throughout the drafting stage both peer and teacher conferences supply the dialog. Teachers of writing know that clear expectations, clear guidelines, and a sincere climate make for improvement in the writer and the writing. Common goals, rules, and honesty make for effective communication in any setting. In the classroom the paper gains clarity and voice as the writer engages in dialog and makes decisions (revises) accordingly.

At some point, however, our writers hand in their papers for grading, publishing, posting on the bulletin board, or the like.

All decisions made, revision at an end, they relinquish ownership, or at least cease to manipulate the form and content. This is a logical and long awaited step: to share with one's audience. This is also a very fragile step in the growth of the paper and the writer, for the teacher must realize that the dialog present up to now can and must naturally continue. No finished writing, no matter how finished-final draft, published, posted, or bound between two covers-is truly finished, because it still has the potential to generate dialog. More dialog may mean either more revision, or more writing, and it certainly means more growth for the writer.

The idea that the process never need end is easy to see. When we leave a note on the door of a friend we had hoped to find at home, we often make it clever as well as informative. Is that simple message the end of the matter? I was here; you weren't. No, of course not. "Did you get my note?" or "What did you think of my note?" will be the first thing that we say when we next meet up with our friend. That brief piece of writing we turned over was not an end at all, rather a midpoint in an ongoing communication. Scholars, after publishing a piece of research, expect to engage in steady harangue or debate, which just may generate the next article. Authors endure a love-hate relationship with reviewers, but would be lost without them. William Faulkner's long account of the McCaslin family, Ike in particular, is an example of story and characters not coming to closure with the publication of the first book, *Go Down, Moses*. Shakespeare first gave us Sir John Falstaff in 1597, and then brought him back again and again. John Updike can't seem to leave Harry Angstrom behind, nor has Grace Paley abandoned Faith, Richard, and Tonto. There appears to be ample precedent here for keeping even the most final of drafts in process.

The question then becomes one of how best to keep the dialog open if the author (owner) so wishes, and how to avoid unintentionally ending discussion. Certain types of assignments can lead the writer to an end point with little or nothing more to say. Closed questions, factual reiteration reports, and subjects of interest only to the teacher lead writers in one direction only and leave them stranded there at the end. Very long assignments restrict dialog by being so laborious as to make the student want the end to come, often prematurely. Even the timing of the assignment plays a part; papers which are due the last day or the last week of the

ranking period are “dead soldiers” to the student, even if they should receive a thorough reading and a conscientious evaluation.

The comments made on a finished paper are also a two-edged sword. Correction of grammatical errors, in particular, sends a mechanical, one-way message. Granted, young writers should not be permitted to make wholesale errors which are within their power to correct or avoid, but a balanced evaluation must address the writer’s decisions regarding the unified effect of content, form, and language. Comments confined solely to errors in language and usage convey the message that form and content are unimportant and therefore unworthy of further discussion. Comments which are not text-bound also leave the writer with little to respond to. *VAGUE*: OK, but what makes it that way, and what specific effect is lost? *INOCH*: That may well be, but which two ideas seem unrelated? Your student can’t carry on a conversation with a grammar machine. And it goes without saying that the paper with no comments at all does nothing for the progress of the student writer regardless of the grade at the top of the paper.

Having examined a few of the ways we as teachers can inadvertently bring the dialog to a close, let us now explore some of the ways to keep it open. First, and I know that this is difficult, don’t have long papers due at the end of a ranking period. Too much is being finalized at that time. The student will focus more on the grade for the term than on the grade or the comments on the paper and their contribution to the overall grade. If that seems unmanageable for your system or style, try this: stop assigning long papers in the first place. Instead, use a series of shorter papers all dealing with roughly the same topic. High school students tend to choose research topics which are too broad anyway. Instead of allowing the student to write on “The Civil War,” have him or her do a short report (in his or her own words and properly documented) on a particular battle. From this have the writer spin off into other related areas suggested by the first paper: specific weaponry, particular generals, battle tactics, similarities with other battles, or profiles of a special fighting unit. The series of papers has several advantages over the research paper. Writers have a stronger and more frequent voice in topic selection. They can cut their losses and get a new topic more easily. They are not being asked to perform operations (e.g. synthesis) of which they may not be capable. They begin to see that inquiry and communication generate more inquiry and communication.

When making assignments, begin with an open-ended question. Then, on the finished paper, your comments can address the writer's answer to that question with your own questions. Remember that Socrates was the first teacher, and all he did was ask questions. Respond as a human reader, not as a language cop. Question the high order concerns of unity, coherence, and emphasis before commenting on the low order concerns of punctuation, spelling, usage, and sentence structure. If your student can neither spell nor explain communism, help first with the explanation. Constructive, text-bound comments keep the writer thinking and talking about content. Keep that paper in revision for as long as the two of you can stand it.

Several teachers I know, and several researchers I've read, advocate doing lots of writing and having the student choose three (or four, or five) for grading at the end of the term. The student/owner gives the papers one last look and/or revision and turns them in for a grade. If that practice works for you, fine; and, while I don't see any great harm in it, I'm not comfortable with it for myself or for my teaching situation. What I can see is a student's revising a paper from a previous ranking period for a grade in the present ranking period. The student would have to contract for the revision by explaining a plan to make the paper say or mean more. Again, the dialog continues, the communication continues.

Another way for papers to go on communicating even after submission is for a teacher to accept for grading one written assignment from another discipline. The science or social studies grade already on the paper would not be a factor. You would simply grade the paper on the merits of how well it stated and then achieved its purpose. More audience means further dialog and less perception of the finished paper as finished.

The present awareness of process writing is helping students and teachers maintain a dialog throughout the stages of writing. We must not forget, however, that the paper handed in for a grade is not necessarily finished. Whatever the grade, the student's dialog with readers can and should generate discussion, inquiry, and new understanding. When the final draft comes across your desk, both you and the student need to keep in mind that if it isn't a dialog, it isn't communication.

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