

IMPROVING WRITING FOR STUDENT PUBLICATIONS

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It is Friday afternoon deadline time for the student newspaper. Three stories are missing and four others read as if they were written in remedial English class. At this point, no adviser wants to lecture on how to teach writing.

Publications advisers know how to teach writing when they have the luxury of time; they also know that the realities of yearbook and newspaper production make the luxury of teaching writing in the publications classes rare.

Every adviser has found himself or herself in the frustrating position of having for a student publication a staff that is made up of one or two good writers and a myriad of other students who are willing to work but are very inexperienced at writing for a newspaper or yearbook. The limitations of time make it impossible to train every student to write effectively and still produce a publication that is ready on the deadline.

Reality tells us also that English teachers often find themselves in the position of trying to teach publication writing and produce the student publications from an English class or in a study hall setting.

Some schools have the advantage of newswriting courses that prepare students for work on publications, but other schools do not. When students are placed in a course called "Newspaper" or "Yearbook," the adviser is expected not only to produce a good publication but also to train these novices in the arts of writing, layout, photography, design, and printing.

And, of course, many advisers are expected to accomplish this Herculean task as an after-school activity.

However, the chaotic environment of the student publications lab may be one of the best environments to foster learning of writing. It is a setting that allows, in fact encourages, involvement of the writer, peers, teachers, and professionals in the production and revision of text.

Literature on the writing process indicates that it is through an understanding of the complex task of producing writing that learning takes place. Recent movement from the product-based writing methodologies to process-based methodologies is providing teachers with more models of that process and teaching strategies for working with students through the process. The publications setting, because it is structured in a much more informal, tutorial format, provides the ideal laboratory for involvement of both teacher and peers in the process of writing.

Teachers of English and journalism can look at their student publications as informal labs where writing instruction is a constant. Experienced older students, professional journalists, and fellow students add to the tutorial instruction for young writers without adding to the teacher's instructional time. The loud, informal, give-and-take nature of the publications classroom that may disturb the rest of the school may, in fact, be an ideal environment for writing to be developed.

In addition, studies of student writers reveal that the concept of audience is extremely important in the development of competent writers. The development of an understanding of audience and purpose may be the key elements to success for writers. No other setting helps develop the real sense of audience than the publications classroom. Here, the teacher is *not* the audience; rather a real audience of students, parents, and advertisers is primary. Students in the publications settings have an opportunity to write "for keeps" so to speak. Each time their work is accepted it becomes permanent and public through publication, so they have the understanding from the beginning that there is a real and public audience for their work.

Students who elect to work on student publications are often interested in writing and like to write, even though they may not have had much experience at it. That built-in interest means that many may select writing careers. That fact makes

the publications lab an even more important teaching environment. Those of us who find ourselves as publications advisers know what an important learning environment student publications provide, and we like working with students on such an informal level. We are still faced with the problem, however, of how to make that writing experience good and productive for students and still get the job done of producing the publications on time.

There is no easy answer here, but there may be help. If you are an adviser, you may find help from your own publications students and students in your other classes. In addition, your colleagues in English and other disciplines may be able to help you find new ways to generate publishable stories.

These suggestions for improving publications writing grew out of several workshops for Indiana high school newspaper and yearbook advisers who were looking for ways to teach some writing within the constraints of a “publication” hour or an after-school publication time. Look them over, and perhaps you will find some suggestions that will work in your situation. They are designed to alleviate some of the time constraints on you and take advantage of the skills of your staff, faculty and other students.

BUILD ON ALREADY GAINED WRITING EXPERIENCE

Students come to student publications with some writing experience from other classes. Take a look at what they have written in English class. It could be that they have already mastered a descriptive style or an expository style that can be used in a newspaper or yearbook story. Perhaps a journal or a narrative about student life would make a decent feature. Written dialogues from classroom experiences, reviews of speeches, films or music—even outlines and lists can make interesting reading, and some of your staff may already feel comfortable with those formats.

Not every newspaper or yearbook story has to adhere to the inverted pyramid structure, nor do all stories have to be in the objective third-person format of traditional journalism. Consider the use of first-person narratives, journals, and themes as potential columns, sidebars, or editorial stories for your publications.

THE ENGLISH DEPARTMENT CAN BE YOUR BEST ALLY

There is no rule that says only student publications staff members can write for the publication. Newspapers all over the country use “stringers” and magazines depend on free-lancers to do most of their writing. Look to your department for some added guest writers. Student bylines provide a wonderful incentive to bring in new students for occasional assignments.

Find a teacher who is willing to give a class assignment on a newsworthy topic and use the best essays as feature stories or guest editorials. Or better yet, use your own students in your other classes as potential guest writers for your publication. The use of non-staff writers can work especially well in yearbooks where the student essay or journal becomes a feature sidebar to a story.

Some teachers in your department may be very willing to work with the news style for an assignment. Offer your services to come in for a class hour and review the news structure. Advanced students in honors programs or gifted programs may like the challenge of trying the news style and could provide a whole series of news stories for your publications. Although it may mean more work for you in the short run, it pays off in the long run with more stories and more potential staff members who have been exposed to journalism and the enticing byline.

Assignments for classes can include essays on student attitudes toward sports, journals that reflect student viewpoints on everyday school life, or student surveys on teen attitudes. One of the most successful feature stories we had in our high school newspaper was a journal that a non-staff member kept during the month preceding the prom. The student was a class officer who was involved in the planning and decorating. The journal gave students a real inside look at what was involved in creating the prom. You might want to use this assignment for a class or suggest that some members of your staff keep a journal as they cover school activities.

Stories that involve research or collection of information through surveys make excellent class assignments and are usually stories that are too time-consuming for the staffs. Here are some additional suggestions for English classes that can also be used

in history, government, psychology or other classes.

- How the school board works
- What happens at a school board meeting
- How taxes are collected and distributed for schools
- What is kept in lockers—descriptive or survey story
- How students use their time—journal or survey story
- Fads, fashions, music, movies—what is popular
- Localizing a national event or trend—interviews with local business, industry, or media leaders
- The speech story—covering a local or school guest speaker

The Personality story:

- a coach
- custodians
- the nurse
- teachers
- the registrar, school secretary
- the local hangout owner
- the principal or superintendent
- students who have unusual jobs, hobbies

Opinion polls—how students view national issues, local problems, school issues, teen problems, drugs, alcohol

24 hours in the life of:

- a working student
- a teacher
- a coach
- a band member
- a basketball player
- the principal

The descriptive scene:

- a basketball game
- swimming practice
- the local MacDonald's at lunch
- study hall
- Friday night hangout after the game
- a biology experiment
- a class field trip

DON'T TRY TO MAKE EVERYBODY A WRITER

Your efforts will probably only lead to frustration if you try

to make every student on the staff a “complete reporter.” Instead, pick the ones who show the most promise and let them go after the stories. Use other students as “partial” writers. Let them do what they can to build a story. They can often get interviews, fill in information sheets, check names, and all the other detail work that is part of the writing process.

SELECT MODELS AND POST THEM FOR STUDENTS

When the creative juices just won't flow and students just can't think of a story idea or lead idea, an example may be the incentive they need. Plaster your room (if you have the luxury of having it to yourself) with story models. Find examples of features, sports stories, news stories, club stories, yearbook theme copy, and every kind of story you might use from both other student publications and from professional publications.

Choose stories that are short and are written in a format that fits your publication. *USA Today* is a good source because the stories in that paper are short and directly to the point, yet colorfully written. Other publications including specialized magazines such as *Sports Illustrated* can provide wonderful models. Posting the headlines and the first three or four paragraphs will probably be enough to help the students get a new idea or new angle on an old story. When students hit a snag, tell them to copy from the pros. There's no sin in imitation. It's the best form of flattery, they say.

TRY CORPORATE WRITING

This may sound strange, but surprisingly it works fairly well, and it serves two purposes—a story gets written and the weaker writers learn how the better students go about putting together a story.

In corporate writing a class or a group of several students write a story together. They may share in the information-gathering process, or they may only help in the writing stage. The best method for writing a corporate story is to use the blackboard. Students just begin reviewing the information and listing the facts on the board and then suggesting leads. Someone writes down the first suggestion; the students suggest changes until they get a lead they all like. Then they continue through

the story. As overhead projector works well also, the transcriber writes on a transparency so everyone can see the story develop and participate in sentence and story structure.

Our staff often used corporate writing when we were trying to write a feature about common student experiences or attitudes. One of the most successful corporate writing exercises for our staff was the writing of “academic” copy for the yearbook. In the first “brainstorming” session on the English department, staff members talked about interesting and unusual experiences they remembered from their English classes or from other students, and the editor listed them on the board. Each staff member then took one of the listings and followed up by gathering more information from the teacher and students involved. The activities they selected from their initial brainstorming session included a Shakespeare dress-up day, a speech class demonstration speech on taking care of babies, and a field trip to a publishing plant.

On the following day, the group listed on the board their follow-up information, and together they worked through the writing of the story. It was more interesting, more comprehensive, and probably more representative of the newsworthy activities of the English classes than if one inexperienced writer had written the story.

Although this form of writing is time-consuming, it does use the skills of many students. Think of how often you have worked with one writer while fifteen other students wasted an hour waiting for you to tell them what to do. At least in this exercise, everybody participates.

USE A FORMULA SHEET FOR GATHERING INFORMATION

This suggestion is not intended to get you the best story of the year; it is intended to get the basic information you need for a story from the student who has very little interviewing experience. You might create a formula sheet for sports, for instance, that has blanks to fill in for scores, names of players, coach’s quotes, and outstanding plays. You might create a formula sheet for clubs and organizations that provides the basic information about officers, meeting times and places, special projects, and school contributions. You can create formula sheets

for any of the areas of coverage that require detailed fact gathering. A sample fact sheet is shown in illustration 1.

USE A TAPE RECORDER FOR INTERVIEWS

The value of using a tape recorder is in its use in polishing a story. Every adviser has had the experience of the too-short story or the story with no quotable material. The tape can sometimes provide the needed fill-in without having to hunt up the source. Tape recorders can be useful tools in the newswriting process, but for the very practical purpose of getting more information at deadline time, they are worth it. If a poor writer has a tape of his or her interview, an editor or other staff writer can often construct an interesting and more thorough story just by using the tape; a bad story can often be salvaged at deadline time.

CREATE A LIST OF POTENTIAL STORIES

Even the best writers aren't always the most adept at finding the interesting news angle on a story or even identifying the news in the school. You and the editors can help by preparing a list of potential stories for student journalists. Sometimes that list might be in the form of questions or suggested areas of inquiry. For instance, in the area of sports, you might ask students to look for stories using the following starter questions:

- Who are the special individuals in this program?
- How does the "system" work?
- Where does the money come from? Where does it go?
- What is the history of this sport at our school?
- What are the "rituals" of the sport? Where did they come from?
- How do athletes train?
- What is the equipment like? Cost? Use?
- Who are the behind-the-scenes people? Trainers? Referee?

Every school has hundreds of good stories, but sometimes students need some directing to find them. Starter lists can help.

Although these suggestions are presented with the best intentions and were gleaned from my own trial and error and experiences of many other advisers, I am tempted to take my

own advice with a grain of salt. Time constraints and the call of deadlines make the best-laid plans . . . well, you know the rest.

Few people understand what it takes to produce a student publication. The work load is tremendous and the demands on an adviser's time are enormous, but the satisfactions of watching students gather, write, edit, and publish their own work make the job worth doing.

These suggestions won't solve your problems or even make your job much easier, but if just a few stories don't need a full rewrite, if just one deadline comes a little easier for you and is met on time, if you gain some new staff members, if you get just one fresh approach to an old story, or maybe if just a few writers improve their writing, the suggestions will have been worth trying.

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Sample Interview Sheet Clubs and Organizations

General Information for background

- Who are the officers? _____
- Who is the faculty adviser? _____
- What is the official name? _____
- How many members? _____
- How do they join?/Who is eligible? _____
- When do they meet? _____
- Why do they exist? _____
- What changes have occurred in the organization this year? _____
- Who started the organization? ____ When? ____ Why? ____

Information for the story

- What is the activity that occurred this (week, month) that involved the most people? _____
- When did it occur? _____
- Where did it occur? _____
- Who was there? How many? _____
- Why was it held? _____
- What happened there? _____
- What were the results? _____

(i.e. money earned, new members)

What person was responsible or did the most?_____

Why was this activity important to your group?_____

Was there any unusual preparation for the activity?_____

(Answers to these questions provide the basic information for a story. The information also tells a writer who to contact for more detail.)

Illustration 1