

## The Writing Standards Part II: Re-Inventing the Writing Process

K. Scheidler

### Overview

Somewhat similar to the “Reading Wars,” which in early reading development pits a stress on phonics learning mastery against “whole language” or learning to read based on desire to make meaning of words, we have two camps in teaching writing. One stresses format and “correctness;” the other writing instruction philosophy stresses idea development

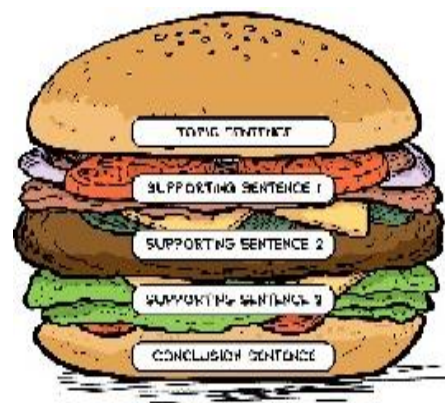


In the 1980’s, propelled by the National Writing Project, teachers learned a new way of teaching writing, called the writing process, based on the thinking of Don Murray’s *A Writer Teaches Writing*. The writing process moved teaching writing away from the standard five-paragraph essay to having students write in varied formats, and stressing ideas. Not only this, but writing also became a content area taught in schools, not simply having literature as the focus, with writing based on literature. Journal writing asked students to write their thoughts. Free writing was encouraged, simply for children to learn to

get their ideas out on paper. Students were asked to share their writing with other students. Strong, insightful ideas were stressed, not format.

As with any change in schools, the new writing process ideas were highly controversial, often pitting veteran teachers against new converts. But gradually this writing process approach filtered into schools and became the primary, most valued means of developing student writing.

Then came the state tests. Over time, with review of the types of writing expected on national tests, schools moved to more formulaic writing. Teachers were instructed to use, and voluntarily picked up, certain formats for the type of writing students would find on tests. The simple format of the “Open Response” question with an introduction, examples, and conclusion response was stressed in many states, at all grade levels. The Open Response question was intended to have students answer a question on a central piece of a reading passage, give two or three pieces of evidence from the passage to support one’s answer, and add a concluding summary sentence. This structured writing is called the “Hamburger” or “Oreo Cookie” approach with the topic sentence, details, concluding sentence. The goal was to have every student be able to write using this format. When a longer composition was tested at certain grade levels, the five-paragraph essay was re-introduced, once anathema to the writing process field.



Common Core State Standards change this more formulaic approach to developing student writing.

## **Idea Development over Format**

We learn from writing. Sometimes a graphic organizer of some type – an outline, or graphic, can help organize our ideas. Struggling students often benefit from having a simple structure. But strong writing comes primarily from developing our ideas in writing. Professional writers will often say they don't know what they're going to write until they write it. Ideas flow as we write. Authors talk about their characters developing as they write about them. One writer cried when his character died. This is because writing is thinking, and thinking develops through writing. We don't know what we want to say until we write it.

When we want to help students develop their thinking, we ask them to just write on a topic, often called “free writing.” In this initial stage of getting thoughts on paper we ask students to not be concerned with sentencings, correct spelling, and punctuation. Such “conventions” of correctness are important to having a reader understand what is being said, but come at a later stage in the writing process.

Common Core Anchor Standard Ten underpins the other Writing Standards. Standard Ten urges us to “Write routinely over extended time frames . . . and shorter time frames . . . for a range of tasks, purposes and audiences.” Frequent writing in varied ways develops students' writing ability.

Standard Ten and the other Writing Standards ask us to move away from formulaic patterns of writing to broaden and deepen students' ability to write. With frequent writing for varied purposes, writing comes more naturally. A student is prepared to write on varied topics in varied ways

and for different audiences. One “texts” one’s friends in a different way than one would write a brief informative research paper – needed for college and workplace writing.

In the real world of work we’re required to report on information (explanatory writing), or present a case, perhaps to present a position for why one decision is better than another in a report to an individual or a group. When a student learns to write well in varied ways, this can mean the difference between succeeding in college and/or on the job, or not. A student may be able to get by in school without being an effective, versatile writer, but not in college. We do a disservice to our students when we limit their writing ability. Developing students’ writing ability helps him or her express oneself in a more formal style, develops and deepens thinking, brings coherence and organization to writing, and helps a student love language and expression of ideas through writing.

What is now called “process writing” is based on the ideas of the earlier trend of the writing process. Students write; the teacher helps to develop the student’s writing. Ideally, the student is prepared with a class developing ideas or generating a prompt to write. The teacher analyzes a student’s writing to find general areas that need to be developed in the thoughts expressed, and the teacher works in individual conferencing with students to draw out their ideas. A carefully developed rubric geared to the particular writing assignment guides development of the final product. When the teacher sees common areas of writing skill that need to be developed, whole



group instruction and practice is used. Common grammar or punctuation incorrectness found in a class's writing are taught in mini-lessons. But the emphasis is on initial idea development, commonly termed "first drafts."

## **Idea Development**

A journal, in the language of the writing process, is intended have the focus of not writing for correct spelling, punctuation and grammar, but primarily to get ideas out. Younger children are encouraged to use invented spelling in order to use bigger words that the child may not yet know how to spell correctly. They can learn the correct spelling later. Early on, the focus is writing expression.

A second grade special needs child may not be able to write well when given the school's second grade writing prompt. But when the teacher probes interests and ideas, the teacher finds an area the child is excited about. Ideas pour out onto the paper. These ideas then can be shaped into a final draft. Similarly, one middle school teacher generates interest in a topic through broad discussion, then first asks the students to "write from the heart" about the topic. Once words and ideas are on paper, the teacher provides the students with a rubric and asks the students to shape their writing to conform more with the rubric guidelines, to better shape the writing.

When I was teaching, on best days we often discussed ideas from whole class readings, and had lively, engaging discussions. I delineated on the board for students varied ideas generated as we discussed, and then asked

the students to write on the topic, providing a prompt that had emerged from the discussion. Teaching in long block classes, my urban students would immediately turn from the discussion to their writing, eager to express one's own opinion on the topic. Then the school bell would ring for the regular school schedule. Students would leave the classroom at the bell, for a break, and return upon the second bell, sit down and continue with their writing. There was no need to herd the students back into the classroom; they returned on their own, to continue with their writing. Wonderful writing emerged. These were students who till then had not been writers. Generating ideas from the group stimulates one's own thoughts for writing.

As an example of the trial and error we develop in our teaching, a habit I adopted from reading students' papers -- as an attempt to make the onerous paper reading more appealing for me -- was that I would look for writing that was especially interesting in ideas or in how an idea was expressed. This made the writing assessment more fun for me as the reader, to see what students were saying, and how they were expressing it. Then I would read the best papers, or pieces that struck me, aloud in the class. I used different students' writing at different times. The students listened attentively to hearing their peers' work read. They learned good ideas and good expression from hearing their peers' expression. Ideas were often novel, coming from the heart. My reading aloud good work served as a model and inspiration for my students, a positive unintended consequence. Hearing good personalized ideas and expression motivated the students to express their own ideas well. They were competing to have their writing read in class. This helped to bring up the level of writing. More struggling

writers were hearing good models. Students learned to love writing, as a means to express themselves. Writing was based on ideas, not formula. Ideas came first. But these students wanted their writing to be well done also, and correct, so that their ideas were especially well expressed and valued. They prided themselves on a strong conclusion, potent expression, word choice, graceful and varied sentencing. Correctness followed.

The Common Core Writing Standards encourage this idea development and self-expression. Writing Standard Nine stresses using ideas from readings to write with “analysis and reflection” – reading sparks thinking. Teaching this through discussion of readings in class is traditional, good reading and writing teaching. Today this is termed “Writing to Text.”

Writing Standard 9. Draw evidence from literary or informational texts to support analysis, reflection, and research.

In reading discussions and writing work, students learn to shape their writing into the introduction, body, and conclusion through hearing the effectiveness of this through expression of ideas, not from imposing a forced format within which to write. Not from assigning a product such as a five paragraph essay. A short essay could be effective. A lengthier essay could be effective. Length and simple format aren't the focus. Idea development is.

### **Product Formulas for Some Students**

Certainly a writing formula or graphic organizer is extremely helpful for students who are struggling writers, for some who are special needs

students, and for beginning writers. But we must develop students as real writers by committing time and effort to their writing development. As students become better writers, we and they delight in reading their work, and seeing how they grow in writing.

### **Peer editing and conferencing**

Having students writing frequently and their work read by peers and commented on from a guiding rubric also helps develop writing ability. A teacher one-on-one conference on a central issue with a student's writing



helps immeasurably. Having students read their work aloud in small groups helps children see for themselves where their writing can be improved. Here a student also catches errors in word choice, sentencings. Journal writing on class ideas develops writing ability.

Spending the time to help students become peer editors of another student's work takes the burden off the teacher and helps develop the peer editor's own understanding of effective writing. Having students confer in pairs on their writing helps. Creating rubrics to guide and assess students' writing helps the student see what the teacher wants to see in the writing. These rubrics may be found on the internet and modified for varied student needs, or written from the teacher's own expectations, seeing where students need to focus in writing improvement, tailored to a class. When a



rubric is written in kid-friendly terms, the child can more easily understand expectations that guide the writing.

When we develop interesting writing assignments that encourage students to express themselves on an issue and that inspires writing, we can look forward to reading what they write. When we create interesting, inventive writing assignments we can be curious to see what our students say in their writing. A mediocre writing topic will most often result in mediocre writing. Do we want to read those papers? A controversial or stimulating prompt following open, varied discussion engenders strong, interesting, original thinking and writing. We hear the writer's voice. Correctness can be easily taught for. It's the icing on the cake, the final polishing. We start with the cake's ingredients, getting those ideas out, mixing ingredients, putting it all together, before icing the cake.

## **Peer Editing**

When we take the time to develop students as peer editors, these students become better writers themselves. Also, when we can carve out time for individual teacher conferencing with a student, writing improves. The old dreaded method of assigning an essay and teachers having the burden of "correcting" stacks of writing, with comments no one may ever read, can go out the window. It's a new day with varied means of having students do the work, and thereby becoming better writers and thinkers.

One middle school teacher tells me she teaches a writing course. She also teaches four sections at a community college. She tells her eighth graders

that they can't expect to receive their "corrected" papers back earlier than a month. What student cares about a teacher's comments a month later? Consultant Doug Reeves found in a large scale study that one of the few factors that increased achievement – in all content areas -- in high poverty and minority student schools was frequent writing with timely feedback.

An excellent sixth grade teacher commented that other teachers in her school asked why she didn't leave school with piles of papers to correct. The teacher said she tells them, "I have three young children at home. I have a family. I don't have the time to correct papers. I have my students peer edit." Students learn from editing the work of peers. The teacher already knows correctness, organization, clarity and coherence.

Some teachers haven't had students write frequently due to the time consuming, sometimes deadly, job of paper correcting. Time spent developing students as strong peer editors is time well spent. The peer editors develop metacognition --learning about learning -- that helps them become good writers. The writer receives immediate feedback. The teacher sees the final best draft. The burden of paper "correcting" is lifted from teachers. It's a triple win.

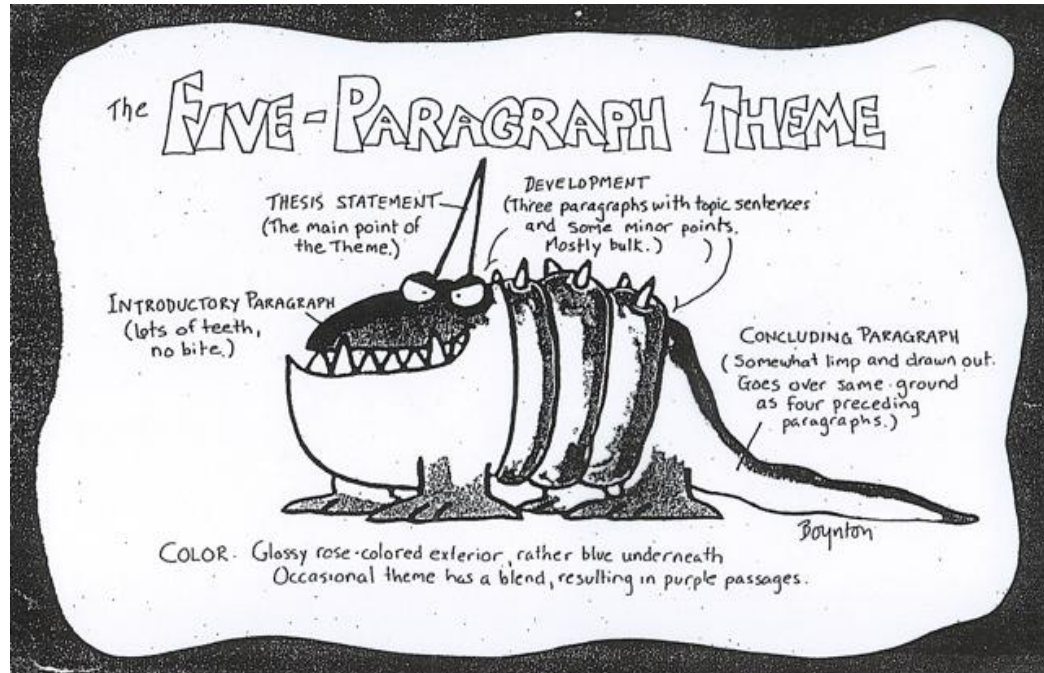


## Summary Conclusion:

### State Tests Drive Writing: The Comeback of the Five Paragraph Essay

During the days of the “writing process” period, the “five paragraph essay” was derided.

Teacher converts to the writing process understood the cartoons and jokes, that this was a formula that didn't



develop idea expression, *The Five Paragraph Theme, Boynton, 1985*

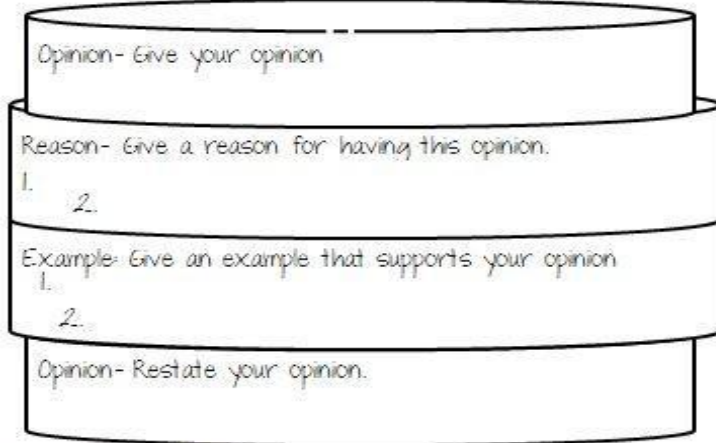
and in fact often squelches ideas.

With formulaic writing for state tests, teachers returned to the format focus rather than idea development and expression. The once dreaded “five paragraph essay” returned to classrooms. The writing process was replaced with formulas, constraining idea development. In real writing, ideas flow forth as the writer writes. Once the writer has thoughts on paper, one can begin again or shape the ideas into the final product.

For earlier state assessments that required a formulaic writing, some teachers quickly picked up the “Hamburger” format – fine for more struggling students, death to idea development.

# Persuasive Writing

## OREO



Remember- giving 2 or 3 reasons and examples strengthens your argument and makes your writing more persuasive.

The Oreo cookie graphic also is popular, with the cookie chocolate top and bottom denoting the introduction and conclusion, often the same statement; in fact, “re-stating” is encouraged. The middle is the body of the writing piece. Again, this has great appeal for whole class instruction and is a clear graphic for more struggling writers.

But real writing isn't a formula. It's developing ideas in writing.

Common Core State Standards expressly call for a return to the writing process, now often referred to as “process writing.” Three different types of writing are called for at each grade level, varying writing for audience and purpose, and write for a range of tasks, purposes and audience. “Planning, revising, editing, rewriting” are explicitly stated in Writing Anchor Standard Five. Writing Standard Six states “interact” and “collaborate with

others,” to discuss ideas with peers and the teacher. The writing process is revived, returning to replace formats that stifle the idea development that develops better thinking and writing.

Teaching writing can be fun when we look forward to what the writer has to say, and how he or she expresses oneself. Developing this ability with students develops high quality writing that’s interesting to read.

### Common Core Writing Standards relevant to the writing process:

#### *Text Types and Purposes*

1. Write arguments to support claims
2. Write informative texts to examine and convey complex ideas and information clearly and accurately
3. Write narratives to develop real or imagined experiences or events

#### *Production and Distribution of Writing*

4. Produce clear and coherent writing in which the development, organization, and style are appropriate to task, purpose, and audience.
5. Develop and strengthen writing as needed by planning, revising, editing, rewriting, or trying a new approach.
6. Use technology, including the Internet, to produce and publish writing and to interact and collaborate with others.

#### *Range of Writing*

10. Write routinely over extended time frames (time for research, reflection, and revision) and shorter time frames (a single sitting or a day or two) for a range of tasks, purposes, and audiences.

Reference Reeves, Douglas B. *High Performance in High Poverty Schools: 90/90/90 and Beyond: Accountability in Action*, Read and Learn publisher, 2000