Developing Writing Skills in Our Students

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THE BUCK STOPS HERE

• Yes, parents should have insisted their children read rather than play video games
• Yes, high schools should have prepared students better.
• Yes, the English 101 class does not prepare students for professional writing

But they are your students now.

Advanced Writing Skills

• Expert writers
  – are goal directed
  – understand their topics
  – consider how paragraphs and sentences advance the goal
  – use cohesive devices to tie sentences and paragraphs together
  – aware of and anticipate readers needs
  – attend more to meaning than form in writing
  – make more revisions than non-expert writers

(Flowers and colleagues, 1980, 1986)
Developing Writers

- Often do not view writing as a product
- May believe revision is about word choice or punctuation
- Cannot simultaneously incorporate feedback on multiple elements of writing
- Revision must target specific skills
  - how to introduce a topic & support it
  - how to build an argument
  - how to check for grammar problems
  - when to look at spelling/punctuation

Who are the poor writers?

- Individuals with limited access to quality writing instruction
- Individuals with diagnosed language or learning disabilities
- Individuals with undiagnosed language or learning disabilities

Why can’t students write well?

- Poor comprehension of the material
- Macrostructure problems
  - Poor ability to organize information
  - Poor ability to use different organizations for different purposes
- Poor ability to produce advanced grammatical forms.
- Weak vocabulary skills
- Spelling and punctuation problems
Poor Comprehension of the Material

- The renaissance was a time when people felt more worth in their beings. Martin Luther was nailed to a church door in Germany for selling papal indulgences. He died a horrible death by being excommunicated with a papal bull.
- Donatello was called the father of the renaissance because of his love of the female nude.

http://history-world.org/essays.htm

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Macrostructure Problem

While there are some areas of the brain that work individually, under certain auditory conditions many stimuli can be linked in a function with each other depending on both localization and lateralization. The ability to hear can effect the location in which the brain processes different forms of speech. Phonetic and emotional tasks are relatively processed in the right hemisphere. The focus put on a certain ear will effect which auditory cortex is activated. Non-primary as well as primary regions can be activated depending on sound level. Different tones of speech, complex and pure activate both hemispheres of the brain.

-Too many ideas in first sentence makes this difficult to follow.
- Idea 1, some brain regions work individually
- Idea 2, sometimes auditory stimulation evokes linked function
- Idea 3, linked functions may be distinguished by their localization and lateralization patterns.
Paragraph does not establish a topic/have one coherent theme
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Advanced Grammatical Forms

• Socrates was a famous Greek teacher who went around giving people advice. They killed him. Socrates was killed by an overdose of wedlock

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Errors of Sentence Construction

• Wong et al (1999) studied when the people with the implant heard silence it activated the right temporal region.
• Sound levels are seen in both hemispheres when researched by Hart et al (2002).
• Heschl’s gryrus has more involvement in sound levels.
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**Weak Vocabulary**

- Sir Francis Drake circumcised the globe with a 100 foot clipper.
- The government of England was a limited mockery. Queen Elizabeth was a virgin queen and her troops shouted hoorah when she revealed herself in front of them. She beat up the Spanish armadillo.

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Spelling & Punctuation

• Henry the VIII didn't like woman's heads very much.
• The climate of the Sarah is such that the inhabitants have to live elsewhere and certain areas of the dessert are cultivated by irritation.

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What can be done?

• Consider the primary goal for writing assignments
• Develop a departmental writing curriculum
• Incorporate best practices for writing instruction
Goals for Writing Assignments

- Demonstrate knowledge
  - Essay exams
  - Ungraded Essays
  - Class generated test questions
- Acquire new knowledge
  - Term papers
  - Article reviews
- Improve writing skills
  - Short papers
  - Feedback
  - Rewrites

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Writing Curriculum

- Goal 1: “Hit them hard with the writing stick.”
  - Focus their attention on writing skills
  - Convey the program’s “seriousness of intent” concerning writing
- 200-level required courses
  - Read single data-based journal articles
  - Explicit teaching on writing
  - Multiple short writing experiences
  - Graded for writing form
    - Writing error rubric is provided
    - NOT graded for content, style, persuasiveness, etc.
Writing Curriculum

- Goal 2: Master professional writing conventions
  - Use a professional tone
  - Support positions with evidence
  - Master basic writing skills
- 300-level classes
  - Multiple short writing experiences
  - Graded for writing form and content

- Goal 3: Write to communicate
  - Adapt writing to different professional needs
  - Use a professional tone
  - Support positions with evidence
  - Master basic writing skills
- 400-level classes
  - Short and long writing assignments
  - Graded for writing form and content

WHAT CAN BE DONE?

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- Develop a departmental writing curriculum
- Incorporate best practices for writing instruction
WRITING INSTRUCTION

- Components of exemplary writing instruction: Recurring themes
  - literacy models (print exposure, peer examples)
  - regular writing practice
  - planning, feedback, revision
  - explicit instruction of specific skills
  - thematic ties of writing to other activities

Butler & Silliman, 2002

LARGE CLASS TECHNIQUES

- Provide a rational for instruction
- Include writing lectures
- Provide a grading rubric
- Teach editing
- Teach how to elicit feedback
- Provide feedback
- Provide a chance for revision

Why Writing in a Science Course?

Gaffes in Cover Letters Likely to Mean the Hook for Hapless Job Applicants

Letter: "My intensity and focus are at inordinately high levels, and my ability to complete projects on time is unspeakable."
Response: You don't say!

Letter: "With the advent of windows, I acted as a consultant to a variety of small businesses."
Response: Sounds a little like spying.

M. Messmer, Resumania, 2005
Going in to business?

The direct cost of poor writing—whether read by customers or your coworkers—may be up to 10% of [sales income]...bad writing not only confuses customers, it may anger them.

Peter Geissler
Business Consultant

From those who employ...

- Question: How important is writing skills for the retention and promotion of your employees?
  “It is absolutely critical to have good writers around, whose knowledge is steeped in the subject matter. [Those who can write] have absolute job security. Furthermore, those with leadership skills, political savvy, technical competency and communication skills (including writing) are the ones who can write their own career ticket.”

  Jeannette Plante, Engineer
  Owner & Founder,
  Dynamic Range Corporation

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Sentence Construction

• One idea=one sentence
  – Avoid redundant sentences (2 sentences=1 idea)
  – Avoid run-on sentences (1 sentences > 1 idea)

• Sentences have Subject + Verb minimum.

• Use sentence length for emphasis
  – longer for explanatory purposes
  – shorter for making a strong point

Word choice

Make sure the word means what you intend
Punctuation errors

• Most common error is use of the semicolon.
• If you feel the need to use one
  – Remove your fingers from the keyboard until the feeling passes (James Kirkpatrick).
  – Use two sentences instead.

Large Class Techniques

• Provide a rational for instruction
• Include writing lectures
• Provide a grading rubric
• Teach editing
• Teach how to elicit feedback
• Provide feedback
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• Takes away grading “subjectivity”
• Teaching assistants can use it reliably
• Scale the points off relative to the egregiousness of the communication problem the error creates
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- **Teach editing**
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**Outline-level Editing**

- Does the first paragraph introduce the overall topic?
- Does each paragraph establish a single topic related to the overall topic?
- Are the topics represented by each paragraph correctly ordered?
- Are all sentences within a paragraph related to the paragraph topic?
- Does each sentence include one and only one idea?
- Is there important information missing (do I get lost)?
- Is there redundant or partially redundant information?
- Ignore other aspects of the writing
Is there important information missing (do I get lost)?

- **Too many ideas in one sentence**
  Early study of the brain involved careful observation of the behavior of patients who had suffered brain damage. Famous cases in history involved damage to the frontal lobe from a stroke and from an industrial accident. These cases are proof that the frontal lobe has various functions.

- Early study of the brain involved careful observation of behavior in patients who had suffered brain damage. One famous case in history involved damage to the frontal lobe from a stroke. The patient’s subsequent loss of expressive language revealed the frontal lobe’s role in speech. A second case involved damage to the frontal lobe after an industrial accident...

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- Provide a rational for instruction
- Include writing lectures
- Provide a grading rubric
- Teach editing
- Teach how to elicit feedback
- Provide feedback
- Provide a chance for revision
• Early writing: Need content feedback
• Later drafts: Need form feedback
• Penultimate draft: Need spelling & punctuation
• Can use worksheets to teach students to elicit correct level of feedback

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**Revision Ideas**

- Credit for Editing
  - Show analysis of macrostructure
    - Paragraph ordering
    - Paragraph coherence
  - Show analysis of microstructure
    - Sentence level
    - Word level (meaning and specificity)
    - Spelling & Punctuation
- Credit for an improved re-write

**Stages of Advanced Writing**

- Planning
  - Idea generation / goal setting
  - Research / organizing ideas
- Translating
- Reviewing
  - Substative modifications
  - Clarification of ideas
  - Selection of precise vocabulary
  - Superficial modifications

(Flowers and colleagues, 1980, 1986)
In professional and business writing, it’s not just the thought that counts.