

A Sampler of Strategies for Teaching Writing

Inquiry

- **Coming-to-Know:** Choose a passage from a text in which a child uses experience to figure out something confusing or scary. An example is Annie Dillard’s description on pages 20–22 in *An American Childhood*, where the author describes seeing a monster come into her room each night and then at some point putting together her “inner life” and her “outer life” to figure out that the monster was simply the lights and noise of a passing car. Stress to students that inquiry means taking what you know and asking questions about what you don’t know (Dean 27).
- **Eavesdropping and Other Everyday, Familiar Forms of Inquiry:** To illustrate that we all engage in open-ended thinking, present students with a real “half dialogue” of someone on a cell phone. Read the conversation in segments of two or three lines and ask students what they think is happening. Reinforce the idea that they can frame questions, hypothesize answers, and live with uncertainty (Weinstein 5).
- **Eavesdropping on a Text:** Prior to reading, give students one-half of a dialogue from a core text. Again, read the conversation in segments of two or three lines and ask students what they think is happening. Reinforce the idea that they can frame questions about the text, predict what will happen, and live with ambiguity.
- **The Initial Think Tank:** To illustrate the messiness of first thoughts, give students a poem and a question about it. Ask them to “think on paper” as they try to answer it—to transcribe their thoughts as they are thinking instead of thinking then writing. This activity is available on the author’s Web site at <<http://www.ncte.org/books/59133/resources/>> (Weinstein 16–19).
- **Learning to Make an Inference:** Give students the following paragraph and ask them to annotate the details in the paragraph that help them figure out what is happening. Discuss all the assumptions they made to try to figure out what was happening. Remind them to do the same thing when they are reading texts in class (Beers 62–63).
 - *He put down \$10.00 at the window. The woman behind the window gave \$4.00. The person next to him gave him \$3.00, but he gave it back to her. So, when they went inside, she bought him a large bag of popcorn.*
 - Here are some possible inferences: pronoun references, setting, characters’ motivations, characters’ relationships, students’ own knowledge about the world.
- **Probable Passage:** Prior to reading, choose key words from a text and present them to students. Have students arrange them in categories according to their function in the passage (e.g., setting, characters, or conflict for a narrative). Then have students write a “gist statement” to predict the topic of the passage (Beers 87–88).
- **Questioning a Text:** Give students a cartoon, face down, on a topic that has interest to them or on a topic related to the reading in class. Ask students to keep the cartoon face down until you finish giving directions. Instruct them to look at the cartoon and annotate details in the cartoon that help them figure out the meaning, writing the questions they ask themselves and the observations they make around the margin of the cartoon. Discuss their questions and observations, and remind them to ask questions of the texts they read in just the same way.
- **Sizing You Up:** As students arrive on the first day of class, have them write what they suspect your course will be like. Regardless of their guesses, ask them (a) where the guess came from and (b) whether *all* the facts on hand support it. Stress to them that they have already shown that they can frame questions, hypothesize answers, and live with uncertainty (Weinstein 5).

Prewriting

- **Big People:** Before students write about character, group students and assign a character to each group. As a group, students review the character traits they remember from their reading and then go through the book together to look for evidence of these traits, which they write on chart paper with page numbers. This allows students to review most of the characters in the book (Dean 36–37). This strategy can be adapted to other types of writing where students must go to the text to support their ideas.
- **From Jumbled Array to Synthesis:** Use this activity to help students synthesize ideas by asking, “What relationship does X bear to Y?” Present them with a jumbled array of familiar words and phrases (e.g., midterm exams, birthdays, brilliance, blindfold, light years) and ask them to synthesize two of them in one of three ways (Weinstein 33–34):
 - X is *like* Y in some ways, *unlike* Y in other ways. (comparison/contrast)
 - X is an *instance* of Y. (exemplification)
 - X is a *cause* of Y. (cause/effect)

Note: The Synectics activities in Jon Saphier’s *Summarizers* is another way of doing this (52–55).
- **Loop Writing:** Have students take a few minutes to write their initial thinking on a topic. Have them reread what they have written to look for a spark, an emerging idea that creates a focus for thinking. Have students write again for a few minutes, find a new spark, and write a summary sentence. Students can do this repeatedly until a central idea emerges (Elbow 59–61).
- **Pass-the-Reflection:** Have students write their thoughts on a topic for two minutes and then pass their papers to one another. Each student reads the previous student’s reflection, then writes for two minutes on the same topic. Repeat this process several times until each student’s initial idea has a number of responses; then pass the reflection back to the person who initiated the thought (Gallagher 38).
- **The Personal Essay:** Give students a dull, safe paper, such as “What I Did on My Summer Vacation” and then give them a penetrating, thoughtful personal essay. Discuss the characteristics that make one shallow and one deep. Give the personal essay a twist, such as “One Thing I May Have Been Doing on My Summer Vacation That I Was Not Aware of at the Time” or “One So-Called ‘Fact of Life.’” (Weinstein 41–42).
- **The Phony Reading:** Give students a passage to read which is full of flawed thought, but do not identify the passage as flawed. You will find a sample text entitled “Mozart’s Childhood” at <http://www.ncte.org/books/59133/resources/>. Have students take ten minutes to write a response to the passage and invite comments. Tell all. Discuss the assumptions we make about published text, particularly when it is handed out by a teacher, as well as ways we can be more cognizant of the faulty logic (Weinstein 37–38).
- **Poems for Two Voices:** Before students write argument, have them write a poem for two voices, where the two voices come from two different perspectives on the topic. Students begin to recognize the complexities of an issue because, in order to develop each voice, they must consider ideas that they may not have considered (Dean 39–40). Be sure to remind students that the two voices are not necessarily polar opposites; for example, one voice may be at the extreme, and the other may espouse a middle ground.

Drafting

- **4–1 Grading:** “Students need coaches more than they need critics” (Gallagher 53). Do not feel that you must grade everything they write. Think about ways that you can ask students to write four times as often as you grade their writing. Here are some ideas:
 - Once students have written a number of different pieces, have students select one to revise and submit for a grade.
 - Give feedback in ways other than writing on the finished paper. For example, while students are engaged in the writing process, circulate and read one short passage, asking a question such as, “What do you want the reader to take away from this...?” (Gallagher 144).
- **Audience Postcards:** Begin by asking students to discuss how they describe a party to a friend who was there, a friend who was not there, and a parent. How do the details, word choices, and tone change? To help students recognize the cues that writers provide to identify audience, have them write a series of postcards from one character to another. Students must use names and pronouns that will identify the audience, as well as content cues to indicate knowledge that is shared by the two characters (Dean 93–94). Follow this activity by annotating the naming cues in an essay where the voice of the author and his/her relationship to the audience are particularly strong.
- **Banning Outlines, Dictionaries, and Grammar Handbooks:** To encourage lively, flowing text, give students the following steps to activate fluency and to stifle the fear of incorrectness:
 - Encourage students to think of writing as a form of human speech.
 - Have them give their planning sheets one last look and then put them out of sight until they finish the first draft.
 - Banish the dictionary, the online thesaurus, and the grammar check.
 - Ask them to quickly bracket words, phrases, and sentences that may need work later on and then move on.

These strategies will prevent students from writing as though they are filling in blanks on an outline or trying to create flawless writing instead of generating ideas (Weinstein 59–60).

- **Beyond the Grecian Urn:** Don’t just show students the polished model; show them, step-by-step, how to produce the urn. When teachers share their own writing as models, it is usually only after the draft has undergone several rewrites. By sharing one’s own jumbled first thoughts, teachers help students understand that all writers, even English teachers and professional writers, must work hard when they sit down to write. Many students are afraid that their writing will be horrible, and sharing early drafts with them will help them understand that, “Bad writing is necessary before good writing emerges” (Gallagher 49–51).
- **Direct Writing:** Give students a short timed writing to practice. Have them divide the available time in half. The first half is for “helter-skelter” writing without worrying about organization, language, or precision. Students write everything they can think of that pertains to the writing task: incidents, images, ideas, and facts. Tell students to pause when they realize they are digressing, skip a line or two, and get back on the topic. The second half is for revising. Have students go through the pile of ideas, slash out words and sections, rearrange it, and end up with something usable (Elbow 27–29).
- **Stuck Points:** When students have “writer’s block” (or are stuck at any task), have them write down everything that they have done and ask these questions: When did things start to go awry? How would you describe the problem from where you are at this moment? What is happening inside you, outside you? This increases students’ awareness of what causes them to get stuck so that they can anticipate future problems (Elbow 97).

Revision

- **Color Coding:** To help students understand the difference between summary and analysis, show students a 30-second clip from *Monday Night Football*. One announcer, Al Michaels, summarizes what is happening on the field, and the other, John Madden (or his replacement), makes a value judgment about the play and analyzes why the play worked or failed. Explain that students need to do both jobs when writing an analysis essay. Once the students have written a draft, give each student two highlighters of different colors and have students highlight the drafts so that they can see whether they have summarized or analyzed (Gallagher 145–146). Though Gallagher uses this strategy with literary analysis, it could also be adapted to a synthesis essay.
- **Beyond the Five-Paragraph Essay:** To encourage students to experiment with less formulaic methods of organization, read essays that blend several methods of development effectively. Group the students and give each group a different essay to color-code for the many types of development the author uses. Have groups share what they learned with the class. When they draft their next essay, have them color-code their own drafts and talk with their peers about whether they have availed themselves of the best options for organizing the draft. **Note:** A good essay for modeling this process is “Doubts about Doublespeak” by William Lutz on page 122 in *Models for Writers*. Here are a few examples of the types of development used in the essay: extended definition in paragraph 2 and throughout; exemplification in paragraph 3; division and classification in paragraphs 4 through 8; and cause and effect in paragraphs 9, 11, and 14.
- **Finding Your Voice:** Choose a piece of writing that has strong voice and rewrite the passage without voice to show the contrast. Project the two passages side by side on the board and ask the class to annotate the passages and discuss why the original piece has stronger voice (Gallagher 70–71).
- **Giving It a Rest:** For one writing assignment, have students turn in rough drafts and then “just blithely sit on those drafts for a few days” so that the ideas are no longer fresh in students’ minds. Then return the papers just as they were turned in, without teacher feedback. Give students ten or fifteen minutes in class to reread the drafts to look for phrases that would lack meaning to the audience, phrases that are ambiguous, and claims that the audience would find unconvincing. Then ask students to revise the draft before submitting it for a grade. Afterwards, ask students to consider the value of writing an assignment well before the due date so that they can revisit it with a clearer eye (Weinstein 63).
- **The Lighter Side of Imprecision:** To help students understand the assumptions that we sometimes make as writers, bring two neckties to class and give one to a student who knows how to knot a tie and the other to a student who does not. Have the students stand back to back, and ask the experienced student to give verbal directions for knotting the tie while the other student follows the directions. This will usually result in a mangled mess. Follow the activity with a discussion of the factors that caused the communication to fail, which usually include: steps that are skipped because the experienced person makes assumptions, terms that are vague or ambiguous, and unclear pronoun references. Ask students to infer how this same miscommunication occurs in a written composition (Weinstein 67–68).
- **Question Flood:** Project a short, underdeveloped draft on the board to model this technique. Have students brainstorm questions that have been unanswered in the initial draft. Discuss which of the questions need to be answered to bring more clarity to the draft. Have the class rewrite the draft together, incorporating answers to some of the questions. Then have students work in peer groups to follow this same process after they have written their own initial drafts (Gallagher 69–70).

Editing

- **Finishing:** Just as a piece of furniture needs finishing touches, so does writing. However, not all writing needs all the aesthetic touches at the writer's disposal. Much student writing is a way of thinking through what they are studying to arrive at an understanding of the concepts or texts. Jim Burke suggests that writers ask themselves three questions:
 - What does "finished" mean for this piece of writing?
 - What do you need to do to accomplish that?
 - How will you know when you have accomplished this (i.e., finished it)?

If an assignment calls for perfect prose, writers must do what they can to achieve perfection. On the other hand, if the assignment is a call to critical thinking and personal reflection, writers need not be fastidious (Burke 150).

- **Grammar Self-Assessment:** Find a diagnostic assessment that you like or create one of your own and have your students complete it. (You can find one such assessment on the author's Web site at <http://www.ncte.org/books/59133/resources/>.) Provide students with the answer key and ask them to compare the answers with their own. Allow students to ask questions, and be prepared to discuss gray areas, such as the deliberate use of a sentence fragment or the placement of a comma before the *and* that introduces the last item in the series. Have students transform their self-assessment into a personalized checklist to use during the process of revision (Weinstein 77–78).
- **Index Card Proofing:** Students often miss fragments and run-ons because they are not accustomed to seeing each sentence in isolation, so when they read the paper as a whole, they often see what they are expecting to see. The day before the final draft is due, give each student two index cards to use as they proofread their drafts. Have students read sentences individually, using one index card to cover the sentence before the one they are proofreading and the other card to cover everything that comes after the end mark. Give students an opportunity to correct errors before they submit the final draft.
- **Portfolio Differentiation:** To help individual students improve their grammar, usage, and sentence structure skills, write the two most egregious errors or most noticeable stylistic issues at the end of the student's first graded essay and have the student record those two problems in the portfolio. Demonstrate to students how to consult a style book (e.g., *A Writer's Reference*, *Writers INC.*) to locate pages that explain how to correct the error or to improve the use of language. When students peer edit the next piece of writing, have students ask their peers to look specifically for those two errors. Do this for each common task so that, by the end of the semester, students will have learned to use teacher and peer feedback to improve their writing.
- **Proofreading Backward:** Writers often overlook errors in their work because they are so familiar with it. On the day students submit the final draft, have them proofread the paper one last time, beginning with the last sentence first and going backward to the first sentence in the paper. Allow students to pencil in corrections on the final draft before submitting the draft for a grade (Weinstein 77–78).
- **Surface Revision Through Sentence Branching:** To help students achieve more sophisticated sentence structure or more sentence variety, show students how sentences may be "branched" at the beginning, in the middle, and at the end. Give them a simple sentence and model how to add a participle, an absolute, an appositive, or an adjective phrase in three different places. Then ask students to look at their drafts to see if they can revise sentences, particularly in places where they begin a series of sentences in the same way (Gallagher 64–65).

Presentation or Publishing

- **The Alliance for Young Artists and Writers:** This organization showcases winners from three contests. The showcase Web site is located at < <http://www.artandwriting.org/>>.
 - The Scholastic Art and Writing Awards
 - The Best Teen Writing
 - Spark: Young Voices and VisionsThe Scholastic awards have categories in both writing and in composing in digital media. The site has PDFs of the writing portfolios of the winners, so it is also a good source for student models.
- **National Gallery of Writing:** Have students submit appropriate work to the gallery Web site. “The National Gallery of Writing is a virtual space—a website—where people who perhaps have never thought of themselves as writers—mothers, bus drivers, fathers, veterans, nurses, firefighters, sanitation workers, stockbrokers—select and post one thing they have written that is important to them. The Gallery accommodates any composition format—from word processing to photography, audio recording to text messages—and all types of writing—from letters to lists, memoirs to memos...The National Gallery of Writing will open for submissions starting this spring, and will be open for viewing/reading from the National Day on Writing (October 20, 2009) through June 1, 2010” (<<http://galleryofwriting.org/>>).
- **Teachers’ Network:** Teachersnetwork.org regularly publishes links on its web site to student writing contests and opportunities: <<http://www.teachersnetwork.org/book/contests.htm>>.
- **NCTE Links:** Here are some of the links to contests that can be found on <ncte.org>:
 - Norman Mailer High School Writing Awards: < <http://www.ncte.org/awards/student/nmwa>>.
 - *Newsweek* Essay Contest
- **Sponsor a Writing Contest:** Some schools sponsor their own writing contests, so you may want to consult with them for ideas:
 - B-CC Writing Contest
 - Wheaton Poetry Contest

Some Words about Teacher Feedback

Here are some research results and some experts' ideas about feedback on student writing:

- “But no matter how detailed I made these comments, students often did not understand or simply disregarded my advice, rarely following through on their next drafts. Over the years, I experimented with my commentary style and strategies . . . thinking that if I could only get it right—the art of written commentary—my students would revise their work or do better next time in discernable if not dramatic ways . . . Much to my dismay, some did not even read my comments....The more detailed my comments, the less students would take responsibility for their own texts....Arguably, written commentary can do more harm than good for teachers and students, emotionally and intellectually” (Monroe 102).
- “The available research suggests that teaching by written comment on compositions is generally ineffective....It may be, however, that when comments are focused and tied to some aspect of instruction, either prewriting or revision, they do increase the quality of writing....[This] indicates the need for teachers to tie their comments to instruction capable of clarifying the criteria they use. It also suggests the need for focusing on one or two key features of writing until students have learned them....Although long comments by all three teachers [in this study] required approximately twice as much time as short comments, they were never significantly more effective than short comments. However, when long comments were not accompanied by instructional prewriting activities or by revision, they were significantly less effective than short comments. Thus, a teacher who spends ten hours a week making focused comments on matters of specificity and focus on the compositions of seventh- and eighth-graders might expect to achieve comparable if not better results with only five hours of work” (United States 181–182).
- “Students resist the marginal question because it's not an answer (Smith, 1989), the corrective commentary because it's depressing (Reed & Burton, 1986), the pithy teacher-efficient mark because it lacks explanation (Land & Evans, 1987), the lengthy end-comment because it seems too critical and generalized (Hillocks, 1982), the recommendation for improvement too removed from their current habits because it seems too risky (Onore, 1989), the critique from peers because it comes from novices (Odell, 1989), the critique from teachers because it comes from an instructor they sense holds a marginal or tenuous academic position (Whichard, et al., 1992). They resist not only for such questionable reasons but also for a good one, because they are more and more seeing themselves as independent and ultimately free to use language as they wish. They resist because they are students” (Haswell).
- “Our students can't become experts between one essay and its comments and the next....When writers are trying to understand an entire genre and its discourse community, they act and think like novices, because they *are* novices. Eventually, with coaching, with practice, and with their own mindfulness, they improve. Students need to know this; we instructors need to remember it....Let's contemplate...the terrible writer in that first-year composition course [who] became a director of writing; in fact, he became known for the wit of his prose. That his writing ultimately was not incorrigible doesn't mean his essays were inspirational for his freshman instructor to read; we haven't solved that problem. We will prop up many a pale and feeble seedling before basking in the vision of a new variety of rose. Nevertheless, it refreshes my mind, I find, as an instructor with a set of papers waiting on my desk, to review the ecology in which we respond. Yes, responding to essays is arid territory if we offer how-to-write courses that emphasize forms. Responding holds more promise of being a fertile task, however, if we offer students arable, abundantly planted fields for learning that provide for sustained engagement with subject matter about which we are knowledgeable and wish our students to be and if students undertake their writing in the spirit of contributing to the cultivation of those fields, even if as yet lowly workers (Gottschalk).

Works Cited

For many additional strategies for teaching, instead of simply assigning, writing, consult the following works cited on this tip sheet.

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