

A Pathway to Effective Writing:

Teaching Writing at
Intermediate and
Advanced Levels

Silvia Stagnaro

2006



THE TEACHING OF WRITING AT INTERMEDIATE AND ADVANCED LEVELS

This is the first of a series of modules designed to help you make your students more effective writers. The modules will cover the following topics:

- ✓ the essentials of writing;
- ✓ a theoretical model of what is involved in the process of writing;
- ✓ a brief review of writing methods;
- ✓ tasks for students to develop competence in the major writing genres;
- ✓ rubrics for students to self-improve their writing skills;
- ✓ correction tips.

All modules will contain theoretical information for you to read, reflexive tasks for you to think about and consider as you move forward, observation and practical tasks for you to carry out and questions for you to answer and share with the rest of the participants. They will be signposted as follows:



Reflective tasks



Practical tasks



Observation tasks

And now, let us turn to writing proper!

Recent research has found that adults dislike writing so much that it is only turned to as a last resource. On the other hand, Erasmus, a German philosopher of the XVIth century, said that the desire to write grows with writing. That is, our first premise will be that the only way we can help our students become effective writers is by making them write, write and write until they begin to enjoy doing so!



Task 1: how do you yourself feel about these two positions? Are you keen on writing or would you rather communicate your thoughts and feelings in other ways? How does your personal attitude reflect on your expectations towards your students' writing?

One of the reasons why the teaching of writing is so different from the teaching of speech is that the two types of discourse differ in many of their characteristics. Following is a list of some generalizations that point at these differences:

Explicitness

Organization

Permanence

Slowness of production

Density

A learnt skill

Detachment

Amount and importance



Task 2: what do you think is meant by each of these terms? How far would you think it necessary or useful to make your students aware of some or all of these points?

Cognitive psychologists have described writing as the most complex and demanding of all cognitive activities because there are no rules. Writers are free agents: they can choose what to say and how to say it. But precisely because of this freedom writing is an exciting, challenging experience that permits students to indulge in fantasy, humour, fiction or fact while drawing on all their inner resources of imagination. Where young children are concerned, the interest is there, the excitement is there, and so much understanding is there. We need to find ways to retain this enthusiasm and level of performance in our older intermediate and advanced students. But before we can do that, we need to be clearly aware of all that is involved in this big skill. Writing, like all other skills, can be broken down into a number of enabling skills, all of which are artfully combined by the successful writer to produce an effective text. Some of these enabling skills are:

- handwriting: forming and Joining letters;
- mastering spelling, punctuation, sentence construction;
- linking sentences, using connecting words; connecting paragraphs;
- being aware of the demands of written English;
- organising information logically and clearly with a specific type of reader in mind;
- using discourse markers appropriately to indicate main points, developments in a theme, change of topic, examples, conclusions;
- using variation in normal sentence patterns and word order to develop theme clearly and emphasise the main points at each stage;
- selecting vocabulary to convey attitude and implied meaning.



Task 3: think of at least three other “micro” skills which are part of writing. Why do you consider them important? Have you experienced any personal trouble with them? Which?



Having considered these essential elements in writing, let us turn our attention to some textbook tasks that are typically used to teach writing. Our main concern will be to try and determine whether they really teach writing or they merely use writing as a means to teach something else (such as grammar, for example). That is to say, do they teach writing as means, as an end, or as both means and end?

Writing as means: frequently, students are asked to take down the vocabulary they learn, use a new grammar rule for the solution of a written exercise, write out answers to listening or

reading comprehension passages, do written tests. In all these cases, writing is used as a means to get students to focus on and practise other aspects of language.

Writing as an end: in other cases, students are required to narrate a story, describe people or places, write letters or reports. In these activities, students need to pay attention to aspects of sentence formation, content and organization which are the central aspects of writing itself.

Writing as both means and end: there are yet other cases where students are for example asked to write an anecdote to illustrate the meaning of certain idioms or words, or to respond to a text they have read using a certain grammatical structure. On these occasions, purposeful and original writing is combined with some other content.



Task 4: look at the following instructions for writing activities taken from different textbooks currently used by teachers:

- a. The sentences in the following paragraph have been jumbled. Write them out in the correct order.
- b. Finish the following sentences to make the meaning of the underlined word clear: *A dancer is someone who ...*
- c. Rewrite the following story beginning with the word “Yesterday” (students get a story in the present tense)
- d. This is a turning point in the story. Before we go on reading, write out your own ending.
- e. For a survey on schools in our country, state the main problems you see in our educational system today.

Now, place the above instructions where you think they fit in the following continuum. Justify your decisions.

WRITING AS
AN END

WRITING AS
MEANS AND END

WRITING AS A
MEANS

In principle, the purpose of writing is to express ideas by conveying a message to a reader. It is then clear that the ideas themselves constitute an extremely important aspect of writing. On the other hand, the writer needs to pay attention to other aspects in order to ensure that his ideas will be understood by the reader in the way that he intended them to. This will necessarily involve him in a slow process in which he will have to activate many of the micro skills that were described earlier in this module. The writer will need to express interesting ideas and do it in such a way that they are clearly organized, using correct structures, with precise and varied vocabulary.

All this amounts to the fact that one of our main difficulties when teaching and assessing writing at intermediate and advanced levels is to maintain a fair balance between content and form.

What exactly we consider “fair” will, of course, depend on the specific situation in which we are teaching, but it seems it would be true to say that at these levels both aspects need to be considered and that excessive attention to one to the detriment of the other one will result in ineffective writing.

Having gone through these more theoretical aspects of writing, it would seem appropriate to establish a set of parameters which would enable us to evaluate writing tasks of the type that are currently included in textbooks. Below is a set of criteria that we could use to evaluate writing tasks:

- a. Motivation: Is the task interesting and sufficiently stimulating?
- b. Level: is the task too easy / difficult ?
- c. Appropriacy: is the task suitable to their age? Is it too sophisticated / childish?
- d. Relevance: does the task respond to their needs?
- e. Preparation: can they plunge into the task or does it require prior guidance from me?
- f. Do I like this task? Would I use it?
- g. ...



Task 5: are the criteria mentioned above acceptable to you? Why (not)?

Which would you omit? Why?

Would you add any? Which?

We are going to end this module with a more reflective task.



Task 6: following is a list of writing activities of types commonly found in textbooks. Think of a particular group of students of intermediate or advanced levels you are teaching at the moment. Provide a brief profile of the group and then evaluate the activities by reference to the group.



Use the criteria listed above together with any other that you might have added.

- a. Write a report of a book / film you have read / seen.
- b. Write a review of a book / film you have liked and would like to recommend.
- c. Write a narrative based on a picture / series of pictures.
- d. Describe an occasion when you were disappointed / afraid / upset ...
- e. Describe the view from your room.
- f. Describe a famous person / someone you know well.
- g. Write an answer to a letter of complaint / apology.
- h. Write a letter applying for a job as a ...
- i. Write a story beginning / ending with the following sentence ...
- j. Agree or disagree with the following quotation. Justify your decision.
- k. Imagine your ideal school / country / world. Describe it.
- l. Think of a change you would like to see introduced in your country. Write a

recommendation to the authorities explaining why it is desirable and suggesting how it might be effected.

- m. Write an ending to the story we have just read.
- n. Write the story from another character's point of view.

Having analyzed and evaluated the activities we tend to use for the teaching of writing, in the next module we shall be looking at different methods to approach the process of composition writing. See you soon!