

A Pathway to Effective Writing:

Teaching Writing at
Intermediate and
Advanced Levels

Silvia Stagnaro

2006



In Module 2, we developed some theoretical concepts related to the process of writing and we looked at a possible method to help students become more effective writers. In this module we shall be considering some specific techniques that can be used to enhance our students' abilities to work on different writing genres.

As may have become clear from our previous discussion, one key element in this process is to ensure that the students are well aware of their strengths and weaknesses and that they consciously work on the specific strategies that will help them improve. For this reason, as an integral part of our writing curriculum, it may be interesting to ask them to reflect on their writing skills through an initial self assessment questionnaire like the one below.

Directions to the Student: This self-assessment is designed to help you recall the types of writing you have done, consider your strengths and weaknesses, and set goals for yourself. Answer each question or complete each statement honestly and keep it for future reference. At the end of the year, you can review this assessment and set new goals.	
1. I have experience writing the following types of papers:	
Personal Expression Expressing your thoughts, feelings, or experiences	
Description Creating a picture of how something looks, sounds, feels, smells, or tastes	
Narration Telling a true or fictional story	
Exposition: Giving Information Providing information or explaining something	
Exposition: Making Connections Comparing and contrasting, offering solutions to a problem, or explaining an opinion	
Persuasion Trying to convince a reader to agree with you	
Reports Summarising the results of research	
Creative Writing Expressing your personal views through imaginative writing like poetry	
Responses to Literature Presenting your ideas and feelings about something you have read	
2. Of the types of writing I have done, the type I am best at is _____	
3. The reasons I am good at this type of writing are _____	
4. Of the types of writing I have done, the type I have the most trouble with is _____	
5. The reason I have trouble with this type of writing is _____	
6. I would like to try more of the following types of writing: _____	
7. I perform the following steps when I write (circle the word that applies):	
Use a journal, brainstorming, or a similar method for deciding on a topic	N O A
Think carefully about the audience for which I am writing	N O A
Write down my purpose for writing before beginning a first draft	N O A
Write a draft without stopping to correct spelling and mechanical problems	N O A
Ask someone else to read my draft before revising	N O A
Proofread and correct mechanical spelling errors after the draft has been revised	N O A
Try to make my final copy neat and attractive	N O A
8. The step in the writing process I do best is _____	
9. The reason I am particularly good at this is _____	
10. The best thing about my writing is _____	
11. The step in the writing process I most need to improve is _____	
12. I need to work on this because _____	
(N stands for never, O stands for occasionally, A stands for always)	

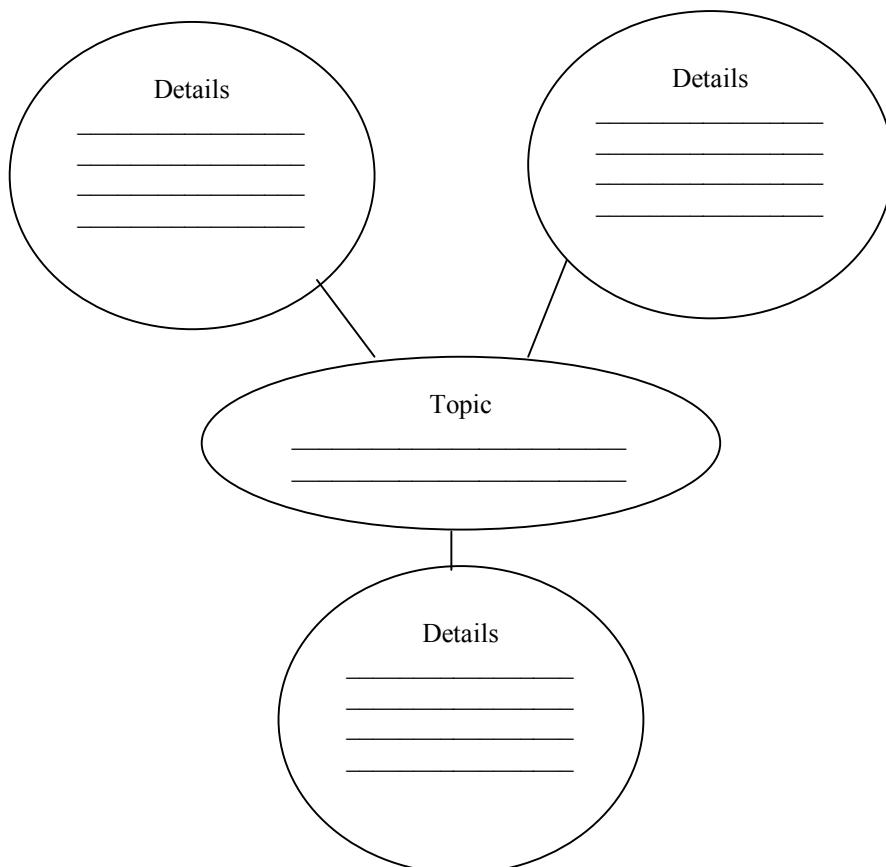
Of course, you can choose to share the answers with the students and discuss with them anything that you consider worthwhile. However, this would depend on the characteristics of the students themselves and on the degree of mutual trust and respect that they have for each other. If the group is particularly competitive, it might be wiser to tell the students to keep their answers to themselves and only go back to them at the end of the year when they have had a chance to work on different tasks and have already gained confidence on their writing skills.

Having asked the students to reflect on their writing skills, we can start to work on the characteristics of different writing genres. We shall start with description and narration. We shall be following the same steps that we described in Module 2 through concrete examples of writing tasks set by a teacher in an intermediate class.

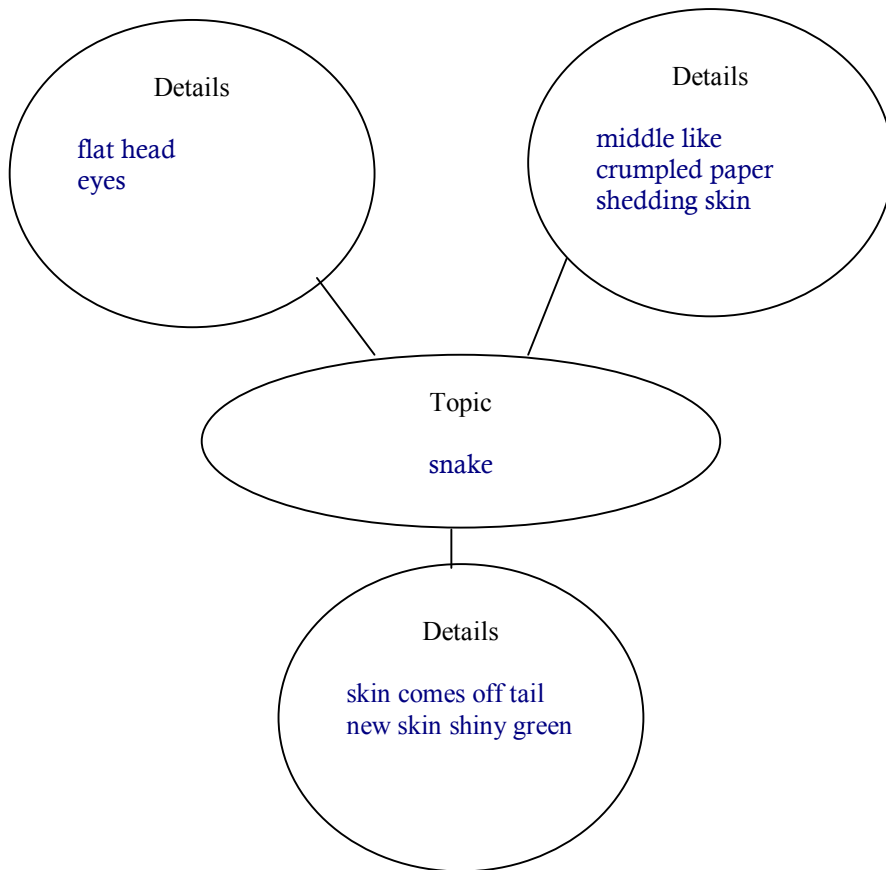
Teaching students to write an effective description

Brainstorming: we started by asking the students to complete an idea web like the following:

Directions: write the thing you will describe on the line in the topic circle. Then organise details about this by writing them in the details circles.



This is an example of a completed idea web:



Prewriting: the following paragraph is a student's first draft based on the previous web:

A New Snake Suit

The wierdest thing happened at a barbecue last summer. I saw a snake undressing. When I sat down to eat, I heard the snake in the leafs. First came its flat head and eyes then I noticed something that looked like paper crumpled around its middle. This was shedding skin that had caught like on a stick and was sliding down its body.

The new skin was shiny green. The skin cam off its tail just like pulling off a sock.

Drafting and revising: these are the corrections the teacher suggested so that the student would work on an improved draft:

Revising Marks	
Move	→
Add	△
Take out	X

A New Snake Suit

garter

The wierdest thing happened at a barbecue last summer. I saw a △

slithering
 snake undressing. When I sat down to eat, I heard the snake Δ in the
 tiny, bright
 leafs. First came its flat head and Δ eyes then I noticed something that
 thin, brown
 looked like Δ paper crumpled around its middle. This was shedding skin
 that had caught liXke on a stick and was sliding down its body.

The new skin was shiny green Δ. The skin came off its tail just like
 pulling off a sock. with a diamond pattern

I wonder if the snake knew that mother nature had given her a
 brand new suit.

This procedure can also be carried out by students working in pairs or small groups so that they get used to helping each other visualize conflicting or erroneous points in their writings. Besides, the students can make use of a chart like the following to keep the focus of their writing:

Revising Checklist

Questions	yes	no	Not sure
Does my description give interesting information about a ...?			
Have I used enough details to help readers picture this ...?			
Did I keep my audience and purpose in mind?			
Have I organised my ideas?			
Is my writing clear?			

Editing and proofreading: As a result, the student proofread the description and, using the code on the right suggested the following changes:

	Proofreading Marks
	Spelling =
	Take out X
	New paragraph #

A New Snake Suit

weirdest garter
 The wierdest thing happened at a barbecue last summer. I saw a Δ
 slithering
 snake undressing. # When I sat down to eat, I heard the snake Δ in the
 leaves tiny, bright Then
 leafs. First came its flat head and Δ eyes. Δ then I noticed something that
 thin, brown
 looked like Δ paper crumpled around its middle. This was shedding skin

that had caught li~~x~~ke on a stick and was sliding down its body.

The new skin was shiny green ^{with a diamond pattern} Δ. The skin came off its tail just like pulling off a sock. ↙

I wonder if the snake knew that mother nature had given her a brand new suit.

Publishing: the whole process finally rendered the following version, which became the student's final draft:

A New Snake Suit

The weirdest thing happened at a barbecue last summer. I saw a garter snake undressing.

When I sat down to eat, I heard the snake slithering in the leaves. First came its flat head and tiny, bright eyes. Then I noticed something that looked like thin, brown paper crumpled around its middle. This was shedding skin that had caught on a stick and was sliding down its body. The skin came off its tail just like pulling off a sock. The new skin was shiny green with a diamond pattern.

I wonder if the snake knew that mother nature had given her a brand new suit.

In fact, since the instructions for this writing task were fairly free, different students produced different descriptions of animals which were then shared in a classroom noticeboard. The students then took a vote on the ones they liked best and these were published in the school magazine.

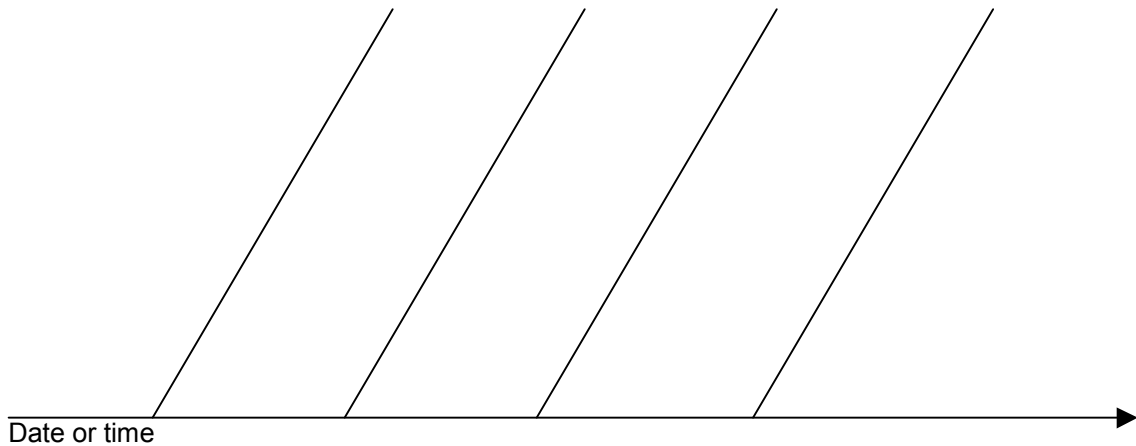
Teaching students to write an effective narration

A similar process can be used to help students develop narratives.

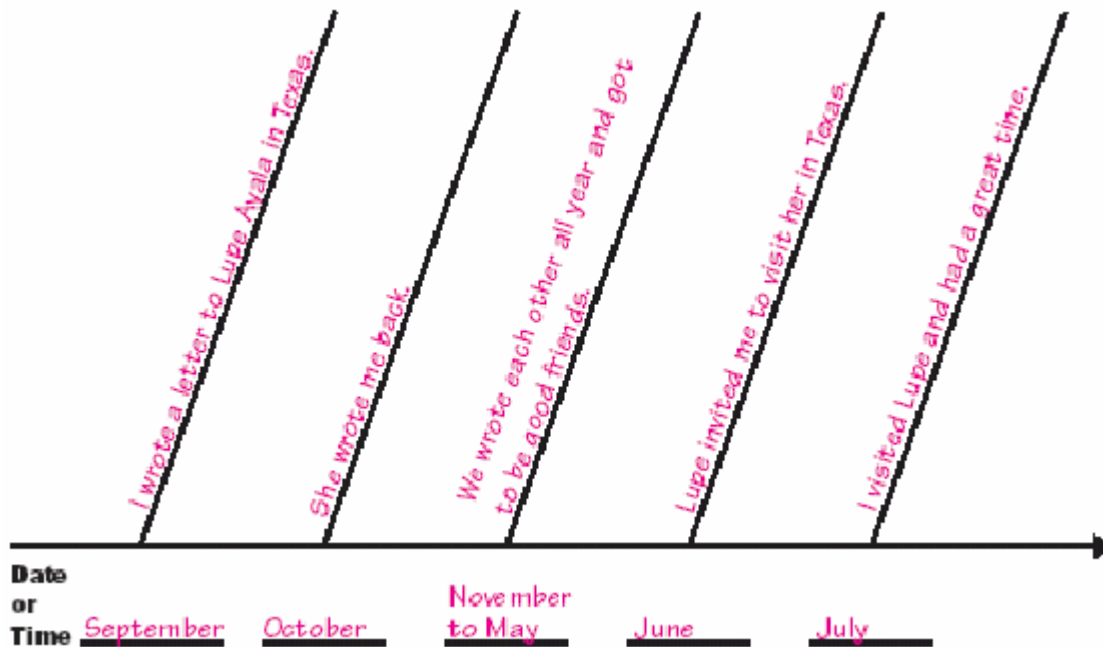
Brainstorming: we started by asking the students to complete a time line to help him organise the text chronologically:

Time Line

Instructions: write the main events of your personal narrative in time order on the slanted lines. Identify the date or time each event happened. Add more lines if you need them.



This is an example of how the time line was completed by one student:

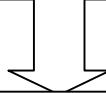


Of course, the same process could have been carried out through the use of another tool such as the following story organiser:

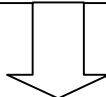
Story Organiser

What happened first?

What happened next?



What happened last?



Prewriting: the following text is a student's first draft based on the time line:

Too Good to be True

Believe it or not. The best adventure of my life started with a homework assignment. To write to a pen pal. In September I wrote to a girl in San Antonio, Texas named Lupe Ayala. I told her that I liked playing soccer and collecting comic books. I checked the mail every day. I finally got a reply in October. Guess what Lupe plays soccer and collects comic books too. Every time we wrote each other. We found out something else that we both liked to do. Then I got a big surprise in June. Lupe invited me to visit her in Texas.

My visit with Lupe was better than I even dreamed it would be. It seemd

we had known each other forever. We rode horses. We swapped comic books. We played in pick up soccer games. I'm really glad I did my homework.

Drafting and revising: these are the corrections the teacher suggested so that the student would work on an improved draft:

	Revising Marks Move → Add Δ Take out X
Too Good to be True	
Believe it or not Δ. The best adventure of my life started with a homework assignment. To write to a pen pal. In September I wrote to a girl in San Antonio, Texas named Lupe Ayala. I told her that I liked playing soccer and collecting comic books. I checked the mail every day Δ. I finally got a reply in October. Guess what Lupe plays soccer and collects comic books too. Every time we wrote each other Δ. W X e found out something else that we both liked to do.	
Then I got a big surprise in June. Lupe invited me to visit her in Texas. My visit with Lupe was better than I even dreamed it would be. It seemd we had known each other forever. We rode horses Δ. W X e swapped comic books Δ. W X e played in pick up soccer games. I'm really glad I did my homework.	

Before going on to the editing step, the student answer the questions in the following checklist to ensure that all the elements in the narrative were present:

Revising checklist	yes	no	not sure
Does my story tell what happened in order?			
Have I told how I felt?			
Did I include details to make my story interesting?			
Is there anything I want to change?			

Editing and proofreading: As a result, the student proofread the narrative and, using the code on the right suggested the following changes:

	Proofreading Marks
	Spelling =
	Take out X
	Add ^
	New paragraph #

Too Good to be True

Believe it or not ^. The best adventure of my life started with a homework assignment. To write to a pen pal. In September I wrote to a girl in San Antonio, Texas^ named Lupe Ayala. I told her that I liked playing and soccer and collecting comic books. # I checked the mail every day ^. I finally got a reply in October. Guess what ^ Lupe plays soccer and collects comic books too. Every time we wrote each other ^. WXe found out something else that we both liked to do.

Then I got a big surprise in june. Lupe invited me to visit her in Texas. My visit with Lupe was better than I even dreamed it would be. It seemd we had known each other forever. We rode horses ^. WXe swapped and comic books ^. WXe played in pick up soccer games. I'm really glad I did my homework.

Publishing: the whole process finally rendered the following version, which became the student's final draft:

Too Good to be True

Believe it or not the best adventure of my life started with a homework assignment to write to a pen pal. In September I wrote to a girl in San Antonio, Texas, named Lupe Ayala. I told her that I liked playing soccer and collecting comic books.

I checked the mail every day and I finally got a reply in October. Guess what? Lupe plays soccer and collects comic books too! Every time we wrote each other we found out something else that we both liked to do.

Then I got a big surprise in June. Lupe invited me to visit her in Texas that summer.

My visit with Lupe was better than I even dreamed it would be. It seemed we had known each other forever. We rode horses, swapped comic books, and played in pick up soccer games. I'm really glad I did my homework.

Teaching students to write a persuasive argument

In an argumentative paper, the writer needs to make a claim about a topic and justify this claim with reasons and evidence. The claim could be an opinion, a policy proposal, an evaluation, a cause-and-effect statement, or an interpretation. However, the writer needs to understand that the claim must be a statement that people could possibly disagree with, because the goal of his piece is to convince the audience that the claim is true based on his presentation of reasons and evidence. An argumentative thesis statement will tell the audience:

- what the claim is
- the reasons or evidence that support this claim
- the order in which the writer will be presenting his reasons and evidence

Let's have a look now at the application of process writing to the production of persuasive arguments.

Brainstorming: we started by asking the students to complete the following organiser:

Instructions to students: complete the entire organiser. In each box write a reason that supports the arguing statement. Next to each box, write three sentences that support the reason.

Title: _____

Arguing statement: _____

Concluding statement: _____

And this is the completed organiser after a whole class discussion and brainstorming process guided by the teacher.

Title: Morning break for the fifth form

Arguing statement: It's a good idea to have morning break in this form

We definitely need a break	We would be less jittery in class.
	We would concentrate better.
	We would learn more.
Teachers would benefit too.	They deserve a break.
	They work hard. They should be able to relax.
Our health would greatly improve	Exercise is necessary for good health.
	We don't get enough.
	We would get more exercise.

Concluding statement: Don't you think that having morning break in the fifth form is a great idea? It certainly is!

The rest of the process was carried out in the same way as was exemplified with description and narrative using the same correction code. The final draft was then used as a springboard for a persuasive letter to the School Head for which the following tools (an idea web and a checklist) were used at the brainstorming and revising stages respectively:

What is the problem?

Who gets our letter?

What changes are needed?

How can we fix the problem?

Revising checklist	yes	no	not sure
Have I clearly stated the problem?			
Do I tell how the problem can be fixed?			
Do I give supporting details?			
Have I used persuasive words and phrases?			
Have I used the correct letter format?			

The above examples show how the writing process was dealt with in a class of young intermediate students.

In Appendixes 1 and 2 you can see an example of how different process writing lessons may be carried out with older students to develop other writing genres.

Since this module has been packed with examples, it seems a good time for you to decide on the way in which you would develop a lesson of this kind yourselves. For this purpose, go to the activities section and do Task 1 (and only!!!!). However, before attempting the task itself, it might be a good idea to use the following checklist to plan a writing lesson since all these features will have to be addressed at one point or another with the students:

Communicative purpose	(What does the writer hope to communicate / achieve?)
Expected audience	(Who will read it?)
Layout	(general <i>format</i> – e.g. does it have a title? What

	appears where on the page?)
Overall organisation	(e.g. what type of information is included in each paragraph?)
Level of formality	(formal / informal / semi-formal? Give examples from the text)
Sentence structure	(e.g. complex or simple)
Specific grammatical structures	(e.g. do any specific tenses predominate?)
Specific vocabulary	(Are there any words / expressions that appear frequently in this type of text? In general, is everyday or more specific vocabulary used?)

Having looked at how the process of writing may be staged to develop the students' ability to write different genres, in Module 4 we shall be dealing with general writing strategies that can be used for all genres as well as for creative writing and subject oriented papers.