

# A Pathway to Effective Writing:

Teaching Writing at  
Intermediate and  
Advanced Levels

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In the previous three modules we looked at the process of writing, the methods that can be used to help students become better writers and some techniques that can be used to enhance our students' abilities to work on different writing genres. In this Module we shall try to summarise all these concepts into a set of strategies that we can tell our students to use so that their written production is really worthwhile.

The strategies are meant to be used for the development of any writing genre. They are presented in a likely order for a student who is addressing a writing task. However, depending on the specific task you set, you may choose to use any of the strategies in any order. It is also important to note that it would rarely be necessary to use **all** the strategies and that as students progress in their writing abilities, and incorporate the strategies as part of their routine, they will feel more confident and will depend less and less on a step by step procedure.

### WRITING STRATEGIES FOR STUDENTS

1. **Choose a good topic:** the first problem all writers encounter is finding a topic that is worth developing. There are some rules that students need to bear in mind when they choose a topic to write about. Below is a list of questions that you can offer to your students before they start writing.

- **Is the topic something you have strong feelings about?** The extent to which a writer cares about his topic is probably one of the greatest influences on how successful their finished piece is. Feelings about the topic will affect:
  - (1) **The amount of effort of you put in:** the more you care, the greater the effort you are prepared to expend;
  - (2) **Your voice:** voice is the personal quality in a piece of writing. The greater you care about the topic, the stronger your personal voice;
  - (3) **Fun:** if you care about the topic, you will have fun writing about it, which will result in a more enjoyable piece for your readers too.
- **Is the topic something you know a lot about?** No one can write about things he doesn't know. If you don't know a lot about your topic, you can:
  - (1) Do some research and learn more about it.

(2) Pick something different to work on that you know more about.

- ❑ **Is the topic something you can describe in great detail?** Details are the heart of any good piece of writing. Without good details, most pieces are boring. Knowing a lot about a topic also involves knowing the little things about it that readers probably don't know.
- ❑ **Is the topic something your audience will be interested in?** Before you can answer this question, you have to know who you're writing for. In your case, most probably, your audience usually consists of the other students in your class plus the teacher and sometimes an examiner. But often we write for wider audiences, too. In either case, you have to know who your audience is and why they might be interested in the topic you've chosen to write about.
- ❑ **Is the topic something your audience will feel was worth reading?** Your readers have to spend time and effort to read your writing. Your writing has to tell them something that will keep them reading all the way to the end, and make them feel it was worth getting there.

2. **Develop an idea:** one of the biggest problems students confront is trying to explain something or persuade someone of something and not being able to. This is highly frustrating, especially considering that in writing they can't be there to clear up any confusion. The only thing a writer can do is make sure that his argument makes sense. This strategy can help students focus in this respect, especially when doing expository and persuasive writing.

#### What - Why - How - strategy

- **WHAT do you think?** This is your opinion. Sometimes a single sentence will be all you need. You can also think of it as your controlling idea if you're writing an essay.
- **WHY do you think it?** If you've got an opinion, you've got a reason for it, and often more than one. If you can't think of a reason, maybe your opinion isn't really what you think. (But then, that's just *my* opinion!)
- **HOW do you know?** For every reason you should have at least one example or other kind of proof. The key to a successful argument is great support. You've got to be able to back up everything you say with good reasons and solid evidence.

In addition to helping with the organization of ideas, this strategy can be used to help students organise a paragraph. Consider the following example:

WHAT	WHY	HOW
<i>I think dogs make better pets than cats for several reasons.</i>	<i>You can train them to do all kinds of cool things. Cats are almost impossible to train.</i> <i>(Another reason...)</i>	<i>My dog can sit and fetch a ball or a stick, and he can even catch a frisbee in the air when I throw it.</i> <i>(More examples...)</i>

Here's what a paragraph might look like if it was based on the first row of this What-Why-How chart. The paragraph is built by moving from left to right across a single row. The student is told to start with the "What," then move to the "Why," and finally, use the "How." It's important to remind the student that the words needn't be copied verbatim and that usually, changes are required for the paragraph to be cohesive and coherent:

*I think dogs make better pets than cats. First of all, you can train dogs to do things that cat's can't. I have trained my dog to sit when I tell him and he does it every time. He can also fetch a stick or a ball, and he can even catch a frisbee in his mouth if I throw it to him. I've never heard of a cat that could do anything like this. In fact, I've heard people say that cats are almost impossible to train.*

**Some extra tips for students:**

- **The "How" column is the hardest.** Even though we might be quite sure of our opinions, it is always necessary to back them up with hard evidence. The important thing is to look in the right place. A personal experience may be all right when the students are talking about their own life. But if they're making a comment about a character in a book, they must look for evidence directly in the text.
- **The "How" column is the most important.** This column always has the most information in it because it contains the tangible evidence upon which all the student-writer's assertions are based. This information is also the most convincing and the one that might help the reader understand and accept the student's opinion. Of course, this requires evidence.
- **The more unusual the position, the more the evidence needed.** The amount of support needed varies depending on how likely the audience is to believe the student. Unlikely opinions may require data, quotations and even visual support at times.

3. **Add Detail:** Details are an extremely important part of writing because they make it possible for the reader to know exactly what a writer is trying to say.

- **What's a detail?** A detail is the answer to a question a reader might have. Usually readers are very curious and they almost always approach a text with questions they want the writer to answer.
- **Why do we need details?** If the writer doesn't give the readers the information they want, they get frustrated and may even stop reading.
- **How can the student put details in his writing?** This strategy is designed to help. Tell the student to select the sentence that needs more support, write it down on the left side of the chart, and then list details on the right side. When the chart is finished, the details can be put back into the piece. Below is an example of how you can teach your students to do this.

IDEA	DETAILS
<p><i>I had a huge car accident one morning when I was driving to school.</i></p>	<p><i>I was stopped in traffic on the freeway when a truck came up behind me.</i></p> <p><i>I heard his engine roar and I knew he was going too fast.</i></p> <p><i>He didn't notice I was stopped so he didn't slow down until it was too late.</i></p> <p><i>He slammed on his brakes and veered to the right but he still hit me. His truck crunched most of the right side of my car.</i></p> <p><i>Glass and metal went flying everywhere.</i></p> <p><i>I was scared at first because I thought I was going to get hurt. But afterwards, I was relieved.</i></p> <p><i>No one was hurt and I was still able to drive my car away. But it needed over \$5000 of repair work.</i></p>

This can even be done as a whole class activity through brainstorming until students get used to looking for all the necessary details to make their written piece interesting enough.

4. **Develop a narrative:** we frequently tell people about something that happened to us, or telling a friend about a movie, or part of a story we've read. All of these things

involve a sequence of events. When describing a sequence of events, it is possible to use the same basic structure, which basically consists of three parts:

- **Transitions.** These are short phrases like “Then” or “After a while” or “In the beginning” that help to introduce each new action in the sequence. It's not necessary to have a transition for each action, but they can be very helpful at making sequence flow smoothly.
- **Actions.** These are the actual events listed in the order in which they occurred.
- **Details.** This is additional information about each action. For each action, the audience will probably have two or three important questions that need to be answered through the details.

Below is an example of how this strategy can be used to plan a narrative:

<b>TRANSITION</b>	<b>ACTION</b>	<b>DETAILS</b>
<i>Last summer</i>	<i>I went on vacation with my family to the ocean.</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <i>We go almost every year.</i></li> <li>• <i>It's fun because there's a lot to do.</i></li> <li>• <i>I get to do a lot of exploring with my dog.</i></li> </ul>
<i>On the third day,</i>	<i>I was walking with my dog along a cliff overlooking the beach below.</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <i>We were about 75 feet up from the beach.</i></li> <li>• <i>We were on a path with trees and brush and big piles of rocks by the edge.</i></li> </ul>
<i>As we got up to the highest point on the cliff,</i>	<i>We saw a small animal scurry under some rocks.</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <i>It startled me at first but then I realised that it was probably more afraid of us than we were of it.</i></li> <li>• <i>I just kept on walking.</i></li> </ul>
<i>All of a sudden,</i>	<i>My dog ran after the animal and jumped over the rocks to try to get it.</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <i>He likes to chase things.</i></li> <li>• <i>I was amazed at how fast he ran.</i></li> <li>• <i>He got close to the rocks but didn't stop. He just went right over.</i></li> </ul>
<i>[No Transition]</i>	<i>I ran after him, looked over the edge of the cliff, and found him clinging to some brush hanging by his paws.</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <i>I was so scared.</i></li> <li>• <i>I thought he'd gone over the cliff and had fallen all the way down.</i></li> <li>• <i>He looked scared, too.</i></li> </ul>
<i>At first I didn't know what to</i>	<i>I tried to reach over the rocks to pull him up.</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <i>I grabbed a piece of the branch and pulled him up with</i></li> </ul>

*do. Then,*

*it.*

- *I just kept telling him to hold on and not move.*
- *I could tell that he was just as scared as I was*

When filling out this chart, tell your students to start in the “Action” column first. Fill in the first box with the first thing that happens. Then, go to the last “Action” box and write the end. Then fill in everything in between. When they finish the “Action” column, tell them to add a couple of details for each action. Finally, tell them to think of simple phrases for the “Transition” column that introduce each action.

5. **Begin with the End in Mind:** It’s a lot easier to get somewhere if you know exactly where you’re going when you start. In writing, it is crucial to know one’s purpose. A written piece is finished when the writer has achieved his purpose. But thinking of purpose as simply “to entertain” or “to inform,” makes it very difficult to know what to write. Having a clear purpose in mind, even if it’s not exactly perfect, will help the student write more quickly and more effectively.

One possibility is to write out an ending before anything else, a simple paragraph or two. Here’s a possible ending to a fish story:

*More than anything else parents do for their children, it’s the time they spend with them that their kids will remember forever and value most. I know my dad gave me many birthday and Christmas gifts, and he certainly tried to give me a lot of advice, but it’s the fishing that I remember most fondly. It was always something I could count on, something that brought us back together when we had been apart, something I knew we would always do again. Except that after I grew up, we didn’t do it again. And I have always missed it.*

*If I ever become a parent, I hope I’ll remember to set aside enough time to be with my kids, especially regular time that they can count on. And I hope, too, that we can continue to count on our time together even after they grow up.*

The writer may not be totally sure if it is any good, but at least he has a destination in mind; so he’ll know when he gets there, even if he eventually finds out that it’s not exactly where he wants to be.

6. **Create a good beginning:** most readers don't want to waste their time reading something that doesn't interest them. And the way most readers determine their level of interest is by reading the beginning and seeing if they like it. To help the students think of a good beginning for a piece, there are three important criteria you can ask them to consider.

- **Catching the reader's attention.** As soon as the first paragraph, maybe even the first sentence, the writer need to hook the reader through something that says "This is a good piece you'll really enjoy!"
- **Making the reader want to read more.** Then, the writer needs to get them to read the rest of the piece. The beginning has to have something in it that makes the reader curious about what's coming up next.
- **Being appropriate to purpose and audience.** Readers want to feel the beginning as an invitation to an interesting and enjoyable experience. The writer must make sure that the readers won't feel disrespected, or that their time is being wasted, or that they are underestimated.

The beginning is the most important part of a piece of writing. The following are some tips that we can give our students to help them make sure that their readers will want to read the whole piece.

**1. Start with an interesting description.**

*Ashes filled the air when I was around the camp fire. Crackle, crackle it went.*

In this beginning to a story about a camping trip, the writer begins with an interesting description of a camp fire. The writer is using sight and sound details that we might not normally think of and this is what makes this beginning effective.

**2. Start with a sound.**

*Boom! The trunk slammed. Bang! The car doors slammed as we got out of the van.*

Starting with a sound is a simple but effective way to get your reader's attention. In this beginning, the writer uses two sounds and a simple repetition to make the beginning even more interesting.

**3. Start with the past in the present.**

*It is April 10, 1912. The Titanic is going to travel all the way from England to America.*

In this history piece, the writer is writing about the past but using the present tense. This pulls the reader into the story by giving him the feeling that the action is happening right now.

**4. Start with an exclamation.**

*"Yeah! We're going to Disneyland tomorrow! Yeah!" I yelled about as loud as I could.*

Readers can't help but get a bit excited when the first thing they read is an exclamation. Usually, the exclamation is a single word followed by an exclamation mark: "Cool!" or "Awesome!" or "Ouch!" Etc. Then, the next sentence or two tells the reader what is being exclaimed about.

#### 5. Start with a thought.

*"I'm in big trouble now", I thought to myself.*

If you start your piece with someone thinking about something, your readers will almost always want to know why someone is thinking about it.

#### 6. Start with a complaint.

*It seems like we never go swimming at Chascomus Lake!*

In this beginning, someone is expressing strong feelings and that almost always draws the reader into the story.

#### 7. Start with a surprise.

*Wow! I kicked the ball as hard as I could and I scored a goal!*

Chances are that if the first line of your piece begins with some kind of surprise, your reader will feel surprised, too. This beginning also starts with an exclamation and that helps convey the writer's feeling in a strong way the reader will be able to relate to.

#### 8. Start with a question.

*Have you ever been an Editor-in-Chief? Well I'll tell you, it's a big job!*

If you ask a question at the beginning, your readers will find themselves wanting to answer it, and this will draw them in. Sometimes, you don't actually answer the question at all. In other situations, the writer may choose to answer gradually throughout the piece. This is one of the easiest leads to come up with.

#### 9. Start with a scary, exciting, or intense moment.

*...I tried to run, but I couldn't. The monster seemed to be growing by the minute! And then, the most horrible thing was about to happen — I screamed and sat bolt upright in bed. I gasped swallowing huge amounts of air.*

This writer is starting the piece with the end of a nightmare. The use of the ellipsis at the beginning tells us that we're right in the middle of something. Then the dash at the end of the dream signals the interruption of waking up. It's a good description of the intensity everyone feels when they awake suddenly from a bad dream.

#### 10. Start with your main idea.

*I will always love my grandparents' beach house. The way the waves role over the sand and the way the sand flows between your toes. The way we pick up rocks and watch the sand crabs scurry away. The way we dig for clams and end up kenee deep in the never ending sand.*

This is the beginning of a descriptive essay about a family holiday spot. The writer just starts right off with the one most important thing he wants you to know: "I will always love my grandparents' beach house." But then he gives you some nice description to go with it, a few sentences that show you what he loves about it.

#### 11. Start with a hint of something interesting to come.

*It all started on an average day. I didn't think anything unusual was going to happen, but I was wrong!*

One of the best ways to hook your readers is to give them just a hint of something interesting without telling them what it is.

#### 12. Start by revealing something unusual.

*"Company halt!" yelled the drill master. My mom stopped and went into position. Her dog tags clinked as she moved.*

Here the writer is playing on a prejudice that he knows most readers will have, a prejudice that makes his lead more effective because it reveals something unusual about the story.

### 13. Start with an unsettling description.

*A flash of lightning illuminates the harsh emptiness of the night. In an orphanage children cry mournfully. They are starving.*

Sometimes the best way to get a reader's attention is to show them a picture of something they probably don't want to see. You have to be careful when you do this because you don't want to offend anyone or make them feel so uncomfortable that they stop reading.

### 14. Start by describing the setting.

*The deafening crowd was packed into the stadium. Hundreds of people, wearing the club's T-shirt, were enjoying the game.*

You can always start just by setting the scene. It's one of the easiest strategies to use. But use good descriptive language when you do it. A phrase like, "The deafening crowd was packed into the stadium" with a nice adjective ("deafening") and a strong verb ("packed"), paints a good picture in the reader's mind and reinforces the feeling of an important night.

### 15. Start by focusing your audience's attention on something important.

*In my old, battered, black wallet I carry many things. A letter from a friend. My lunch ticket. My social security card. Many other tidbits and items as well. There is one thing however, which I prize above all my possessions. It is a photograph.*

This whole piece is about a photograph that is very important to the writer. So, to get us started, he leads us on a little trip through his wallet that ends with a very short sentence about the thing he wants us to think about. Many writers will set up their first paragraph this way. They'll start out in one place and lead you around for a little while until they end up, in the very last sentence, by telling you exactly what the piece is about.

7. **Don't forget the ending!** The other important point students need to be able to master is the ending. Endings are hard, and there are three basic points a writer should not forget about:

#### A good ending should:

- **Feel finished.** A good ending should show that there's nothing else the writer needs to say.
- **Give the reader something to think about or do.** Readers like to have something to consider, something to reflect on, something to take with them for the future.
- **Meet the reader's expectations.** With the beginning and middle, the writer sets up certain expectations in the minds of readers. The ending has to live up

to those expectations, it has to fulfil the promises made by everything that has come before.

Following are some strategies to help our students make their endings as effective as possible:

**1. End with some advice.**

*If you cannot swallow and your throat is puffy, then you have strep. You should get lots of rest. And get a shot because the shot will make you better faster than the medicine. If you're thinking about going skydiving, take my advice: stop thinking.*

It just seems like part of being human to want to tell other humans what we think they should do.

**2. End with your big feeling.**

*When it's time to go, none of us wants to leave. As I say my good-byes, I think of all the fun we had, and what fun we will have next time.*

Sometimes, at the end of an important experience, what we're left with is a single overwhelming feeling (hopefully, a good one). But even if we're sad or angry or scared, ending with a big feeling usually works.

**3. End with something you want your readers to remember.**

*Remember, even though the Mariners are losing doesn't mean they're a bad team. So always remember to keep an extra key somewhere. You never know when you might need it.*

This is similar to the "advice" ending. It works because it gives the reader something specific to think about.

**4. End with something you want your readers to do.**

*Make a commitment to getting in shape today. Turn off the television, put down whatever it is you're reading, start living a healthy life right now. You'll be glad you did.*

This is a very strong type of ending which is most commonly found in persuasive pieces

**5. End by thinking about the future.**

*Last year was definitely the hardest, craziest year of my life. And I loved it! Things are going great. I never knew the incredible feeling of accomplishing things that in the past seemed impossible — not only with school, but with my entire life. Every day is another chance to do something great. And now I have the confidence and motivation to conquer anything that is put forth in front of me. I feel I owe this to many things and to many people, but most of all I owe it to myself. Now I think about the consequences of everything I do and say. And this helps me make better decisions, decisions that help me build a better future. The future! For the first time I'm looking forward to it.*

Most of us think about the future all the time. It's a normal and natural thing. That's why this type of ending feels normal and natural, too.

**6. End with something you learned.**

*I learned that I shouldn't lie because it gets me into worse trouble. In the future I'm not going to lie. If I have a problem, I'm going to tell someone about it, and ask for help.*

This is the classic "moral of the story" ending that most of us remember from when our parents read us stories.

**7. End with your main idea.**

*An actor acts. A hero helps. The actor becomes famous and the hero does not. And that's just it: Heroes don't care about the credit, they just care.*

The last thing your readers read is what they'll probably remember best. Ending with your main idea is almost always a good strategy. The hard part is building up to it slowly and saving it for last.

**8. End with a question.**

*Will the human race ever see the irony in destroying the planet that is its only home? How much more evidence do we need before we take global warming seriously?*

If you can start a piece with questions, you can end a piece with questions, too.

**9. End with a reflective evaluation.**

*My whole world seems to be more on track now that she's gone. My self-confidence, my general attitude has improved immensely. I do miss her sometimes. How could I not after three years of friendship? All I can think is that I was a good friend to her. Our relationship didn't survive, but we'll always have the laughs... and the tears.*

Often, when we find ourselves at the end of something, we want to make a judgement about it.

**10. End with what you started with. (A “wrap-around” ending.)**

There are certain endings we should specifically tell our students to avoid:

**Endings that should not be used**

- **The “The End” ending.** This not a real ending, merely the announcement of one.
- **The “I hope you liked my story” ending.**
- **The “Tell them what you told them” ending.** In this paper, I have just discussed blah, blah, blah...
- **The “It was only a dream” ending.** I was just about to... when I woke up. It was only a dream.

**Some final advice to give our students about how to end their written work:**

- ✓ **Start slow and build.** Usually, the first attempts at writing endings are a single sentence long. Eventually, as they grow more confident, students can be encouraged to try one-paragraph endings.
- ✓ **Write the ending before getting there.** As was said before, it is important to make the student aware of what he may want the readers to think and/or do when they finish reading and just write that down. Even if it's not perfect — and it usually isn't — this gives them something to work with. Then they can go back and write from wherever they were and head towards a new ending.

- ✓ **The ending is the last thing the audience will read.** The students should be aware that readers are likely to remember the ending better than any other part of the text. This means that the ending is the students' opportunity to say something important with the knowledge that the readers will be paying close attention. This is only possible at two moments: one is at the beginning, the other is at the end.
- ✓ **Don't forget the "So what?"** Readers have a right to expect something in return for the investment of time and energy that they put into a text. Specifically, they have a right to ask, "So what? What does this piece have to do with me? Why should I care about it?" Students need to be made aware of the fact that that's exactly the question need to answer through the ending.

This module was essentially planned to offer you practical tips and ideas that you could put into practice with your students straight away. Now you can turn to the activities section and do the suggested task which is basically a reflective evaluative one for you to consider.

See you soon, and good luck!