

# Teaching Writing as a Liberal Art: Ideas That Made the Difference

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*The University of Vermont*

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## **Preface**

The Center for Interdisciplinary Studies of Writing (CISW), in conjunction with the Office of the Vice President for Research, the Office of the Dean of the Graduate School, and the College of Liberal Arts, sponsored a special event entitled *A Showcase of Writing-Intensive Initiatives* as the Center's Tenth Anniversary Annual Colloquium on May 21-22, 1999. The keynote address and a half-day workshop were delivered by Toby Fulwiler, professor of English at The University of Vermont. A revised version of his keynote address, which was entitled *Writing Intensively: Why Less is More*, is published here.

Professor Fulwiler is a pioneer of Writing Across the Curriculum (WAC) programs. Since 1983 he has offered countless workshops on teaching with writing to college faculty across the United States and abroad and has written or co-edited numerous books in the field—most recently *The Journal Book for Teachers of Technical Programs*, co-edited with Susan Gardner (1999); *The Working Writer* (1999); *College Writing* (1998); and *When Writing Teachers Teach Literature*, co-edited with Art Young (1996). We were pleased to have Dr. Fulwiler visit, for central to CISW's mission is the improvement of undergraduate writing by facilitating collaboration among faculty across the curriculum who are engaged in writing-intensive instruction. Professor Fulwiler's keynote and workshop were instrumental in realizing this goal, especially as the University of Minnesota has implemented new undergraduate requirements for writing-intensive coursework.

CISW has long endeavored to be a facilitator in the ongoing discussion about Writing Across the Curriculum. We invite you to participate in this discussion by either contacting us directly or by attending one of the Center's programs. Please see our Web site

([www.cisw.cla.umn.edu](http://www.cisw.cla.umn.edu)) for information about our publications, grants, workshops, speakers, and other WAC resources.

Lillian Bridwell-Bowles, Series Editor  
Erika R.L. Rivers, Editor  
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## **Teaching Writing as a Liberal Art: Ideas That Made the Difference**

### **How Many Good Ideas About Teaching Writing Are There?**

It's the end of a century and I'm taking stock: How many good ideas are there about teaching writing? This is the question I asked myself as I prepared for this talk. How many ideas, in other words, have made a real difference in how I teach and, consequently, how my students learn? At this stage of my career I seem to be more reflective than inventive, more aware of consolidating than pioneering. At least, I think that's where this talk comes from, as I whittle down the many ideas about teaching and teaching writing to the core that really makes a difference. Let me outline the specific ideas—begged, borrowed, and stolen—over my 32 years of teaching writing that have made a recognizable and practical difference in the shape, direction, and worth of my teaching life. In this my most recent counting, there are fifteen of them.

### **Pre-History**

The hardest part of making my list was knowing when and where to start. Up until I actually began to teach writing, I seem to have studied nothing at all about it. I know that must not be true, that I was not a blank slate, when in 1967 I taught my first freshman composition class, but it seems that way. About my own writing instruction, as a student, I remember no author names, no textbook titles, no specific lessons about learning to write from my undergraduate days. This, despite having purchased (and presumably having read) McCrimmon's *Writing with a Purpose* as a first-year student at the University of Wisconsin—Milwaukee. Quite simply, I have no memory of a single lesson learned from that or any other rhetoric or handbook I must have been assigned and presumably read in high school and earlier. What I do remember is what I didn't like, such as being assigned

specific topics to write about or, even worse, being told to write on any topic I wanted to—both scenarios for procrastination and paralysis. Anyway, here are the ideas I remember because they are the ideas I continue to use.

### **1. Less Is More**

The first book that taught me specific lessons about learning to write was *The Elements of Style* by William Strunk and E. B. White, which I first read about the time I first began to teach. The lesson I most remember, as both teacher and writer, is on page seventeen: "Omit needless words." It is the simplest of lessons that I still apply to my own composing, though violate vigorously when I need seemingly needless words to help convey the rhythms of my natural voice. (*It's true, you know, that I work hard to convey the sound of a live human being talking.*) While this book teaches other more rigid lessons about conventional usage and correctness, I seem less able to remember those—to which my copyeditors at Prentice Hall will attest.

### **2. Simplify**

It is possible that I especially remember Strunk's "Omit needless words" rule because it was related to my fondness, at the time, for reading *Walden* and the lessons that text taught: "Simplify, simplify, simplify"—lessons richly illustrated in Henry David Thoreau's clear, concrete prose and especially appealing to a graduate student who didn't earn enough money to make his life complicated, even if he wanted to. Use simple words, convey simple concepts, live a simple life. Since I knew little, my own best early teaching of writing asked students to make more from less.

### **3. Freewriting**



Several years after completing my doctorate in American literature at the University of Wisconsin—Madison, I was hired as a tenure-track assistant professor to teach composition and literature at Michigan Tech (where we would visit Minneapolis at spring break and consider it a trip south). This was really the first time I discovered that people other than Strunk and White had written useful books about teaching writing—Ken Macrorie, James Britton, Janet Emig, James Moffett, Don Murray, and Peter Elbow are names I remember vividly. Each of these early mentors teaches that writers begin, not by simplifying their sentences but by expanding their ideas. According to Peter Elbow, in *Writing Without Teachers*, freewriting not only expands ideas, but also gives inexperienced writers confidence that they have ideas worth expanding in the first place. What I learn here is to make more from more—the more words, the more thought, the richer the writing.

#### **4. Journal Writing**

Where else to put this freewriting, but in a journal? The journal—or writer's notebook, commonplace book, or learning log—is a natural place in which to compose, invent, practice, collect, and store freewriting—and any other slower or less free, but equally exploratory writing as well. This idea resonated especially well with me since I had written in journals, myself, ever since being required to keep one as a sophomore in a creative writing class. And as an instructor, I had been assigning journals to both my writing and literature classes, but with mixed success. Now, I include journal writing as a regular part of the class itself. Instead of assigning journals to be written outside class and never discussing the results in class, I begin with journal writing and use the journal ideas to provoke class discussion. Much better.

#### **5. Writing-To-Learn**

When I read British author, James Britton, I found a theoretical framework for Peter Elbow's powerful practice of freewriting. In *The Development of Writing Abilities (11-18)*, Britton and colleagues argue that writing is not merely an expression of individual thought, but a generative process that creates thought itself. The more you write, the more you think. (The concept seems pretty simple today and is, as far as I can tell, taken for granted by writing teachers. But, in the mid-1970s, it was a bombshell.) Of course, as a writer I'd known at some subconscious level that writing was generative, creative work—as have most writers. It's why, when required to hand in outlines with our high-school compositions, so many of us wrote the outlines last, after we'd written the paper to make them match the ideas we discovered in the act of writing. But once unmasked, this hidden principle led to a new way of organizing and teaching my classes. In what Janet Emig subsequently calls "Writing as a Mode of Learning" (*CCC*, 1977), I found the rationale and justification for in-class writing, which proved to be a springboard for better class discussions, more focused small-group work, and more thoughtful formal papers.

## **6. The Writing Process**

Writers *learn to write* best, I discover, when they learn and practice a messy, complicated multi-stage process—what we have called for three decades, “teaching the writing process,” which in simplest terms used to be called prewriting, writing, and rewriting—or in terms I prefer: inventing, composing, researching, revising, and editing. Loads of good practical ideas here are associated with Don Murray, Sondra Perl, Nancy Sommers, and others, which writing teachers at century's end take pretty much for granted: multiple-draft assignments, peer response groups, student writing published in class books, and assessment of both process and product by writing portfolios.

## **7. Writing Across the Curriculum**

One of my earliest assignments as a new assistant professor in the mid-1970s was to improve writing across the Michigan Tech curriculum. To do this, Art Young and I learned to translate the most sensible ideas from writing classes to courses in all disciplines and to develop workshops to introduce these notions to instructors who were not English teachers. In other words, all teachers, more or less, are writing teachers. The most useful concepts that our WAC program passed on were 1) writing to learn, 2) process writing, and 3) collaborative learning. One of the central outcomes of the writing-across-the-curriculum movement is the development of a legitimate and exciting form of professional development for college instructors, *the faculty writing workshop*.

## **8. Collaborative Learning**

I had been practicing collaborative learning long before I knew the name for it. Hand-in-glove with a process approach to teaching writing is the concept that writers profit from the help of others. Collaborative learning acknowledges that writing is a social as well as individual enterprise: writers collaborate when they brainstorm ideas, share writing in peer response groups, edit and proofread for each other, and publish. I have been a part of a writing group myself for more than a dozen years, and I use collaborative learning techniques in my classes, refining how I use them by reading the work of Ken Bruffee and John Trimbur. Small-group work, along with in-class writing, characterizes most of the classes I teach in both composition and literature.

## **9. Provocative Revision**

My own best modification of the writing process owes a special debt to both Don Murray, who taught me the most about the process, and James Moffet, who taught me the value of sequenced writing assignments. Frustrated by students' short-circuiting the writing process in their own practice, and, hence, not producing very good writing products—by tinkering rather than thinking, editing instead of revising—I reduced the number of individual writing assignments and increased the drafts per assignment, and the students became more, not less, engaged; the writing got more, not less, interesting. But it doesn't happen by chance, either by saying "Go revise this, kid," with no direction, or "Revise exactly as I say," the instructor taking over the paper. Instead, I've learned to split the difference, by asking for additional new writing on the same topic—they must write in a new direction or with a new approach or from a different perspective or in a different form—but it's their choice how to do this. What I call provocative (or radical or focused) revision makes the greatest qualitative difference in student writing, first-year through graduate-school.

### **10. Living Research**

I credit Ken Macrorie and his idea of the "I-search" paper for the emphasis I place on field research—along with library and Internet research—in every class, in every grade level, and in every assignment. If students are writing from personal experience, I want to see drafts based as much on examining personal artifacts as on searching memory. If students are constructing arguments, I want to hear the living pro/con voices—the results of careful interviewing in their papers. If students are writing creative nonfiction (as more and more, I encourage my seniors to write), I want to witness them in the field, observing and talking to others, saturating themselves with information. Macrorie was right when he told student

researchers some thirty years ago, "Start with people" (*Writing to Be Read*, 1976). Living sources engage researchers and enliven their writing.

### **11. Reader Response**

I'm not sure where I picked up this term to begin with. (It might have been via David Bleich, Stanley Fish, or Louise Rosenblatt.) But the main idea proved a powerful corrective to many years of believing that the analytic rules of New Criticism governed all academic reading and writing. That is, we learned in graduate school that all that was important in a text was in the text itself—not the historical moment, nor the author's biography, nor the reader's background. However, as all readers and writers must know intuitively, all of these things do matter—and maybe most of all, what background, beliefs, biases, and blocks a reader brings to reading, a writer does to writing. It doesn't mean, as some of my students insist, that all opinions, unsubstantiated or not, carry equal weight; it does mean that student experience, knowledge, and voices matter in any discussion of reading and writing.

### **12. 50/50 Classes**

My University of Vermont English department invents what we call 50/50 courses, half-reading, half-writing: *Personal Voice*, *The Art of the Essay*, and *Reading and Writing Autobiography*. In all three, students both read substantial literary texts and write, themselves, in the vein of the literature they are studying. Enrollment is set at 25, larger than the writing class limit of 18, smaller than the literature classes which run to 30 or 35. What do these classes look like? Students freewrite frequently, discuss ideas in small groups, compose their papers through provocative multiple-draft assignments, publish finished papers in class books, and are assessed via writing portfolios. For all practical purposes, the

long split within so many English departments between composition and literature, between teaching reading and teaching writing, is resolved.

### **13. The Social Construction of Knowledge**

It was from Lev Vygotsky that I first learned to view the creation of knowledge as more social than individual. Vygotsky argues that individuals learn language by growing up in language communities—then, the language they learn governs their thought—not the other way around. Consequently, the more language communities we enter as we move through life, the more our thought expands. In my classes, this view manifests itself in frequent dialogical activities, from peer writing groups, to ink-shedding exercises, to the regular exchange of letters—all language-sharing, idea-building exercises.

### **14. Letters**

Frustrated by a graduate seminar that meets for three hours, once a week, I ask the students to write me weekly letters to share their ideas about class discussion, assigned readings, and their own writing. I respond at mid-week leaving a single letter addressed to the whole class to be picked up at my office before the next session. In my letters back, I quote questions, concerns, and insights from the student letters and engage in an informal teacher/student dialogue; I prefer paper to electronic letters, but use both. In all classes—both writing and literature classes—my students keep journals and write papers in multiple drafts; however, in those classes where we also write letters, I can guarantee that classroom community occurs in a faster, deeper, and more satisfying way. The stronger the community, the more honest the writing, the better the chance for good writing.

### **15. Teaching with Computers**

For the past two years I've been teaching all my classes in a computer-equipped classroom: 18 computers around the edge of the room, a seminar table in the middle, carpeting, and swivel chairs. My personal mentors here are Cynthia Selfe (Michigan Tech) and Charles Moran (University of Massachusetts). I have learned to work *with* the magnetic power of computers, not against it: when students face their computers, they write; when I want central attention they swivel and face the table. In conventional classrooms, most of the in-class writing was expressive, writing-to-learn, freewriting, and journal-writing; in the computer classroom, I add in-class revision and editing work and often give over more time to writing than talking. The computer classroom, an expensive idea that has come of age, makes all of the other ideas a little easier to continue to practice. (And I include in here a number of ideas made possible by computer technology—e-mail, listservs, Internet research, etc.)

### **Ideas That Have Made Less Difference**

The fifteen ideas that I've just summarized are those that continue to resonate in virtually every class I teach. I have encountered a lot of other good ideas throughout my thirty-some year teaching life from sentence combining, discourse analysis, and writing in the disciplines (WID), to a whole variety of "-isms" (feminism, Marxism, multi-culturalism, New Historicism) and "posts" (post-structuralism, post-colonialism, post-modernism). But none has the impact day in and day out of those I've just described.

### **Coda: Teaching Writing as a Liberal Art**

What these good ideas have taught me most of all is that teaching writing is teaching a liberal art. Learning to write one's own texts, critically and imaginatively, is as much a

liberal art as learning to read, critically and imaginatively, the texts of literature, history, or philosophy. The liberal arts are, after all, about making sense of one's culture, making meaning from one's life. Reading teaches you what you don't already know; writing teaches you what to make of what you read and experience. Learning to write is the most direct way of learning to reflect; it is not the content, but the process of the liberal arts. Nowhere does such critical and creative engagement happen with more intensity, both individually and socially, than in an open-topic, research-driven, process-oriented, small-group-centered, portfolio-assessed class of student writers.



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