

Developing Accomplished Writers

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Introduction

It is vital for students of all ages to become accomplished writers. This is not always an easy feat, and many believe that good writing is something that a student is born with. It is possible to teach a student how to become a good writer, or a better writer with the skills that he or she may already possess. Writing skills should be developed at a young age, along with other basic learning skills. Teachers should also make sure that no student is ever “turned off” to writing. So many students become frustrated with writing assignments, especially when it is academic writing, and not creative writing. This directly relates back to developing writing skills, so that students will not automatically shut down at the sight of an essay or paper. Along with the initial writing experience, students should also develop strong revision skills. Revising any work is half the battle of become a better writer, as well as being able to provide quality feedback.

Developing a Talent vs. Natural Gift

There are many people out there who believe that people are either born with the gift of great writing, or they simply get by without it. From an early age many students are engrained with the thought of “I am not a good writer.” On the other side of this equation, there are instructors who believe that one cannot teach a student how to become a great writer. What students and teachers alike have to understand, is that no student is capable of writing the next great novel in 15 minutes of free-write, or producing a ground-breaking essay without a little research and help. In Baroudy’s article he talks about this very notion, “Although

scholars believe in the idea advocating that 'writing writes', there is no evidence that writing contributes to writing competence; those who write more do not write better and increasing writing does not result in better writing." (Baroudy 2008.) What he is trying to get at, is that students need to be instructed on how to improve their writing abilities.

Students must also be able to understand the cultural background or context of the topic they are developing. No student can be a better writer than their reading ability. "Many students are missing the cultural knowledge when they look at large academic texts. Students can never outwrite their reading abilities. All texts have gaps within them, and successful readers have learned to fill in these gaps when they try to make sense of texts; however, unsuccessful readers don't differentiate between gaps in texts and gaps in their own cultural literacy, so they become frustrated with trying to make sense of texts." (Smith 2010.)

As the age of technology races ever onward, it is still vital that students be able to write in a coherent manner. Even if students may not always be producing essays as part of their job beyond college, they still must send emails, type reports, use text messages, and other types of written communication. It is important that students be able to respond effectively and in a professional manner.

Turning Students on to Writing

The more a student is interested in what they are writing about, the more likely it is that their writing will be of a higher quality. One easy way for teachers to help get their students motivated about writing is allowing them to write about things that may be a little more abstract. One example is to have students answer a daily question that is thought provoking and interesting, but is also related to the subject matter. For instance if the students are

reading stories about acts of bravery or other heroism, then maybe the students could write about the ultimate superhero or what supernatural abilities they wish they had and why. This gets the student thinking about his or her own interests and ideas. In “Helping Students Meet the Challenges of Academic Writing” by Fernsten and Reda, they give a few examples of writing prompts to get writers thinking about what they experience while they write, or what they would like to experience while they write. “Imagine your ideal writing space – the place you would write the most productively, the most beautifully, with the greatest ease. What does that space look like, feel like, sound like? What do you look like? What are you wearing? What is the expression on your face? What are you doing? Now think about a *typical* writing situation for you and ask yourself those same questions. What are the differences? What might be the effect of these differences?” (Fernsten 2011.)

Connecting ideas to what students have already learned is another great way to get them interested in writing. Many schools are trying to incorporate cross-curriculum writing, which is a way of reinforcing what the students have learned in other subject areas. If there are ELL students in a classroom, perhaps a writing project that is based around their culture and how it compares to their new environment. By building upon what students already know and understand will build confidence in their writing abilities.

A huge struggle that teachers face with their students is learned helplessness. What this means that students have a tendency to give up on the assignment before they’ve even really started to think about it. They view the assignment as over their head, and automatically assume that they won’t be any good at it. Another issue when it comes to getting students to write is that many students are focused on the performance goals such as paper length, topic,

due etc, rather than the actual learning process. They want to know exactly what is required of them, and most students will only just meet those basic requirements. By using some of the aforementioned techniques, instructors will hopefully be able to motivate their students to look beyond the word count of the paper, and actually find genuine interest in the subject and the assignment.

Academic Writing vs. Creative Writing

It has often been said that academic writing and creative writing cannot mix. There is absolutely no room for creativity in an academic paper or essay. This notion has been challenged in recent history. In order for a student to be successful in writing in any area, they must have an understanding of both academic writing and creative writing. "The split is undoubtedly bolstered by the gendering of each side of the divide, i.e. 'the academic' is typically male; 'the creative' is female; and by the association of 'mind' (clean, controllable, reasoned) to common notions of 'the academic' and of 'body' (dirty, unruly, irrational) to ideas of 'the creative'." (Antoniou 2008.) In her Article, Antoniou talks about what academic writers can learn from creative writers. When it comes to writing anything about academic work, there is little advice given on how to manage and create emotion faucets. By adding these in to any paper can greatly increase the quality and success of the piece itself.

By working with creative writing, the writer themselves can gain more confidence in their abilities and also begin to establish an identity or voice as a young writer. The easiest way for a student to begin working on creative writing assignments, which can have some degree of vulnerability, is by using low-stake generative assignments. Have students focus on past experiences and begin to write and develop those ideas into something that is a little more

concrete. Trying to create something new can be difficult and emotionally trying, depending on the class. Another step forward to help students is by having them share in small groups, and then perhaps sharing with the entire class. This way students can hear what a few other of their peers have been working on, and not feel nervous or anxious when being singled out in front of the class.

“Even those that display raw talent and confidence in the initial stages of the course find that, with practice, their craft is more honed and their ear more attuned to what they perceive to be ‘good’ writing.” (Antoniou 2008.) Those that are good creative writers will generally be more successful at academic writing, than those who have had little to no experience with the subject. It is important to keep creativity in mind with every aspect of writing.

Feedback and Revision

One of the most important aspects of writing is revision. This is often a step that many students take for granted. The process of revision allows a student to further hone his or her piece. While it is common for younger students to be required to hand in a first, second, and even third draft, as students get older this requirement is usually dropped to only a first draft, or even nothing at all. If there is no requirement of a first draft, teachers can urge their students to work diligently and hand in a first draft for feedback before the final assignment is due.

Feedback is the other critical component of revision, when it comes to developing writers. Too often students receive comments such as “good” “well done”, or “this needs some work.” While those work as base comments, there is no value to those comments. It doesn’t help the student understand what they need to do in order to keep being a “good” writer, or

exactly what needs work. It is the instructor's responsibility to use formative feedback, rather than evaluative feedback. "First of all, most of the feedback is probing and asks questions, an approach consistent with a stance that acknowledges the developing writer's expertise in the content. At the same time, this inquiring approach leads writers to focus on the deeper meaning of their text." (McGarrell 2007.) Help the student really define their topics, and offer praise to keep the student motivated for further development of their piece.

Students should also develop skills by giving feedback to their peer's pieces. Peer revision is a great way to build up the trust in a group of writers. They should come to understand that they can lend their pieces out for peer-feedback, and know that they will be receiving valuable guidance and advice on how to continue their work. By using the peer revision system, it puts all of the writers on the same level since all are trying to achieve the same goal. "Be specific and support your critique with examples from the manuscript whenever possible." (Edwards 2007.) Students can also receive oral feedback by sharing with the whole class. This builds up confidence in public speaking skills, and seeing if the emotion that they have written into their pieces comes through in the reading.

Revision and feedback isn't something that should be reserved for older student writers, the younger that students are exposed to this process, the better it will be for their writing skills in the long run. Joanne Jasmine and Wendy Weiner studied the effects of a writing workshop on a group of first graders. "Teachers should employ the use of mini writing lessons (5-10 minutes) to help with various writing skills. Students should begin to apply what they learned immediately if followed by a writing session. Those who struggle with new concepts will have those concepts reinforced in the writing session. As the children are engaged in these various

steps of the writing process, the teacher observes and confers with the students. The responder's role is to listen, tell back, and ask questions to help students discover meaning and build on what they know." (Jasmine 2007.) By exposing students at a young age to this process of feedback and revision, their instructors are setting them up to become more independent writers and they should be successful at fulfilling their own future writing expectations.

Conclusion

It is important for all students to be confident in their writing abilities. Writing is inevitably part of everyone's future, whether they pursued it as a course of study or not. Instructors need to set students up to be interested in and successful at their writing endeavors. There is a time for creative writing, and a time for academic writing. It's not just a gift that some students have, and others will never have a chance to possess. By using revision and feedback processes, students can gain a greater insight, not just for their work, but for the work of their peers. Students and instructors are both equally responsible for the skills developed in the classroom, and must work together to help the student reach the goals they wish to achieve.

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