

Writing Class? Where to Start?

by Margann MacGregor

After years of teaching English and Language Arts, I enrolled in a writing class as part of my Master's Degree. I thought that this would be interesting and would compliment my teaching experience. Part of the pre-session study was to write a short story. First, panic set in! A short story that someone would read and grade! I reflected on all those years of assigning stories and assuaging students' fears: "Oh, you can do it; write about something you know, something you like." It is amazing how suddenly, once I was faced with *The Assignment*, I didn't feel that I knew or liked anything. This wasn't fun; it exceeded my comfort zone. This was not reflecting in my journal, nor writing short examples for my students. I was the student. My creative work would be judged. I approached the task methodically. I followed the advice that I had proffered in the classroom for years and it worked. However, after that experience, I viewed the writing process and writing instruction quite differently.

Within a community of writers, writing confidence can be increased as students brainstorm together, peer edit, and peer and self-evaluate. However, teacher directed writing instruction with overt, highly structured models, is essential to further increase confidence.

The structured activity and the stylistic suggestions that follow, give students an opportunity to practice writing with reduced risks. Often teachers indicate that highly structured writing lessons curtail creativity. However, I believe the opposite. An analogy may help illustrate. Young basketball players may zealously scan NBA tapes to study their favorite super star - Michael Jordan. From this they may get ideas about footwork, dribbling and "slam dunking"! However, in physical education class, students are taught correct passing, dribbling and shooting. They spend part of the class on highly

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I previously thought that by involving students in a community of writers where they would share and learn together, that students would become better writers and actually like writing. Many did. Many didn't. Then I asked the ugly questions, "What am I doing wrong? What do I need to do differently?" I realized that what had caused me grief with the thought of writing a short story was not a lack of ideas or even knowledge; it was a lack of confidence. I also realized that if someone with my experience could be panicked by a simple assignment, then many of my students must be overwhelmed by what I ask them to do in the classroom.

In order to help my students develop more effective writing skills I put together a number of exercises. Each exercise assists the students to better understand the process of writing. The students gain confidence in their abilities as they apply their newly acquired writing skills. I have used this process in grades five, six, seven and eight. However, students at other grade levels could also use the exercises.

structured drills, and then they play a short game at the end of each class to try to incorporate the new techniques. This is how they acquire new skills. In writing class, the "NBA tapes" might be well written novels from which some students borrow stylistic ideas, but students need to practice the skills in order to incrementally acquire the necessary tools. However, if they practice skills over and over (grammar class), without an opportunity to implement the skills - they often fail to apply them in actual compositions. A blend of structured skill practice and ample application will allow students to explore and develop their creativity and systematically acquire and develop writing skills.

A. THE PLAN:

The first step in the process is to develop a lesson plan. I have included a draft lesson in this article. Also included are a sample of a structured paragraph prompt and four stylistic models to facilitate student revisions.

A. The Plan		
Date:	WRITING LESSON	Period:
Topic:	Materials:	
Opening Activity:	Read a poem or interesting paragraph/students share own or published writing	
Writer's Notebook:	5 minutes of free writing/may be a response to opening activity or concept	
Mini Lesson:	5 – 10 minute lesson grammar, punctuation, parts of speech, metaphorical language etc.	
Lesson:	New concept-note New concept-model Guided practice	
Conferences:	Teacher "roving" conferences – 1 minutes Seated conference, students to teacher's table for more extensive help	
Summary:	Students share/discuss new concept	
Homework:	Various types: preparation, practice, writing, editing	

B. THE PROCESS: PRE-WRITING:

Group brainstorming and discussion is important to help students initiate their writing. I often found that this step would be sufficient for many students; however, there was always a small group that 'couldn't start'. To assist these students, I would utilize one-on-one brief conferences, but these were still unsuccessful at prompting more than a sentence or two from the reluctant writers. I found that if I encouraged those who 'weren't ready' to begin work to follow a more structured model of pre-writing, they were more likely to begin and continue their rough drafts. Often, once I had started with the structured format, a few of the eager writers would opt to join the guided lesson. Now, I use structured models and assignments for all writing activities, especially early in the year.

Confidence Builders:

I. Picture Script Paragraph:

This is a whole class activity that helps students understand:

- paragraph organization.
- topic sentences.
- concluding sentences.

As you need to develop film, this activity requires at least two days to complete. If you wish, you can use magazine pictures for a follow-up activity (or do this if you cannot provide disposable cameras). Articles that develop topics in a photo essay style (e.g. National Geographic) are useful.

“ The Picture Paragraph and Style Models can help writers foster a more positive belief in their ability. ... ”

Materials:

- A) disposable cameras (so that each student can take ONE picture).
- B) Language Arts or butcher paper.

Procedure:

- A) Divide the class into groups of six or seven.
- B) Each group will use a camera to take seven or eight pictures.
- C) Each group will decide on a subject for their shoot (these need to be subjects that can be found in, or near the school).
- D) The group will complete a Picture Script PRIOR to taking the pictures. The script provides an outline of each proposed shot. There should be a TOPIC PICTURE that provides a whole image of the subject. There should be five or more detail shots that gradually focus on the subject. The CONCLUDING PICTURE should be an overview of the subject from a different angle than the TOPIC PICTURE.
- E) Have the students take the pictures. Each student is responsible for at least one shot.

- F) Develop the film.
- G) Students work in their GROUPS and decide which long shot to use as a TOPIC PICTURE, and which long shot to use as the CONCLUDING PICTURE.
- H) Using large paper, students arrange the detail shots according to some criteria (top to bottom, inside out, outside in, etc. depending on the topic). This helps students realize that sentences can be purposefully arranged.
- I) Students compose outlines using a blank Picture Paragraph Script sheet. Encourage students to write one sentence per picture. This section of the activity also works very well as a small group activity.
- J) Groups can create ONE paragraph, OR students can do INDIVIDUAL paragraphs.

I use the picture script exercise early in the school year as it helps the students understand paragraph structure. It is a group exercise so it also promotes group problem solving and decision making skills. My students have always enjoyed this exercise as it allows them to be creative. They have used a variety of settings for the exercise. Most have some sort of school theme. For example they have used the playground or the classroom as the focal point of the exercise. Taking the pictures while on field trips has also been popular.

C. EDITING: STRUCTURED MODELS

So often, when students are told to 'edit' their work, they read it over and try to correct capitals, punctuation and spelling. Some may struggle to replace repeated words with synonyms and rework sentences to create 'sentence variety'. In order to make this process more intentional, structured models and guidelines can be used to increase the variety of sentence types, and improve diction.

Stylistic Considerations:

The titles of the exercises are self-explanatory. Sentence starters provide students with a variety of sentence patterns. Enhancers are stylistic techniques that help students make their written work more interesting.

Prior to introducing the *STARTERS* or *ENHANCERS*, use the *MINI-LESSON* component of the lesson plan to begin to develop an awareness and understanding of the prior knowledge necessary to have the structures make sense. The *SENTENCE STARTERS* and two *ENHANCERS* can be introduced over a period of a few writing classes.

Sentence Starter #1: 'Subject Starters'

1. In the *MINI* section of the PLAN, provide notes and give a brief explanation of the basic parts of a sentence. It is preferable to keep this brief as most students actually already overuse this technique.
2. Use the 'Subject Starter' practice sheet and have students share their responses.
3. Construct a large 'Subject Starter Model' sentence, label it and POST IT on the wall.

SUBJECT STARTER

Model: Sentence Starter #1

The cat	+	crept	+	across the darkened room.
Subject		Verb		add details (where)

A. Brainstorm a list of SUBJECTS and record at the left margin

	Subject	+	Verb	+	Add details
1.	The villain				
2.					
3.					
4.					
5.					
6.					
7.					
8.					
9.					
10.					

B. Record a list of VERBS on above chart
C. Write an ENDING for each sentence.

Once students intentionally use a Subject Starter in a paragraph, they are required to label 'Subj.' in the left hand margin of the rough draft next to the sentence.

Sentence Starter #2: 'Prepositional Starters'

1. In the *MINI* section of the PLAN, provide notes and an explanation of 'prepositions'. Use the 'garbage can' activity to help students visualize this concept. Simply put the garbage can on a desk or table and have students list all the relationship words: e.g. in the can, over the can, through the can, beyond the can, etc.

2. Compile a huge list of prepositions and POST IT on the wall.
3. Use the 'Prepositional Starter' practice sheet.
4. Construct and post a large 'Prepositional Starter Model' sentence.
5. Once students intentionally use a Prepositional Starter in a paragraph, they are required to label 'Prep.' In the left hand margin of the rough draft.

Enhancer #1: Dual Adjectives

1. Introduce or reinforce the concept of adjectives in the *MINI LESSON* section of the *PLAN*.
2. Provide a model of two strong adjectives used in one sentence.
3. Use the 'Dual Adjectives' practice sheet.
4. Construct and post a large 'Dual Adjective Model' for the room.

PREPOSITIONAL STARTER

Model: Sentence Starter #2

Across the darkened room	+	the cat	+	crept.
Prepositional phrase	+	Subject	+	Verb

A. Brainstorm a list of PREPOSITIONAL PHRASES and record at the left margin

Prepositional Phrases	+	Subject	+	Verb
-----------------------	---	---------	---	------

1. Down the powder run _____
2. _____
3. _____
4. _____
5. _____
6. _____
7. _____
8. _____
9. _____
10. _____

B. Record a list of possible SUBJECTS on above chart
 C. Record a list of VERBS to fit subjects

Enhancer #1: Dual Adjectives

Model:

Adv.	+	noun	+	verb	+	Adj., Adj.	+	noun.
------	---	------	---	------	---	------------	---	-------

Quickly, the rancher roped the bold, noble stallion.

Adv.	+	noun	+	verb	+	Adj., Adj.	+	noun.
------	---	------	---	------	---	------------	---	-------

1. _____, the _____ the _____.
2. _____, _____ the _____.
3. _____, _____.
4. _____, _____.
5. _____, _____.
6. _____, _____.
7. _____, _____.
8. _____, _____.
9. _____, _____.
10. _____, _____.

“ Construct and post a large ‘Prepositional Starter Model’ sentence. ... ”

Once students intentionally use Dual Adjectives in a paragraph, they are required to *HIGHLIGHT* them.

hancer #2: Adverbs (or 'ly' words)

1. Introduce or reinforce the concept of adverbs in the *MINI LESSON* section of the *PLAN*.
2. Provide an alphabetized list of adverbs and post it on the wall.
3. Provide a model of a vibrant adverb used in one sentence.
4. Use the Adverb Practice sheet.
5. Construct and post a large 'Adverb Model' sentence.

PEER AND / OR SELF-MONITORING:

1. Require students to *DOUBLE SPACE* all rough drafts so they have ample room to edit.
2. Have students indicate *STARTERS* in the margin and highlight *ENHANCERS* as suggested.

Now it becomes a manageable task to have students peer or self-edit. Marking becomes more objective, and easier, as the students have isolated the stylistic techniques for you! All you have to do is scan! Feedback becomes more meaningful and direct: either they have used a variety of starters and enhancers, or they haven't.

Enhancer #2: Adverbs ("ly" words)

Model:

noun + "ly" + verb + prep. phrase
 The deer cautiously crept across the meadow.

noun + "ly" + verb + prep. phrase

1. The _____ + _____ + _____ + _____.
2. The _____ + _____ + _____ + _____.
3. _____ + _____ + _____ + _____.
4. _____ + _____ + _____ + _____.
5. _____ + _____ + _____ + _____.
6. _____ + _____ + _____ + _____.
7. _____ + _____ + _____ + _____.
8. _____ + _____ + _____ + _____.
9. _____ + _____ + _____ + _____.
10. _____ + _____ + _____ + _____.

PARAGRAPH CHECK LIST:

Name: _____ Assignment: _____ Date: _____

STARTER:	Paragraph: 1	Paragraph: 2	Paragraph: 3	Paragraph: 4
1. Subj.				
2. Prep.				
3.				
4.				
5.				
6.				
ENHANCER:				
1. Dual Adj.				
2. Adv. "ly"				
3.				
4.				
5.				

ce students intentionally use Adverbs in a paragraph, they
 required to *HIGHLIGHT* them.

ILE #1: Each *STARTER* and each *ENHANCER* must be used in *EVERY* paragraph.

ILE #2: No two sentences can start with the same word (in a paragraph).

“ Now it becomes a manageable task to have students peer or self-edit. ... ”

CONCLUSION:

Writing needs to be practiced every day. The Picture Script Paragraph and Style Models can help writers foster a more positive belief in their ability.

Keep the sentence models and word lists posted on the wall or if you do not have 'home room walls', make posters and laminate them so that you can move them with you or provide personal copies for the students to keep in their writing folders. Overtime these stylistic components will become 'Automatic', and students will have more skills in their 'toolbox'. Students will have constructive advice for their



ADVERBS			
abnormally	lively	meaningfully	seemingly
absentmindedly	lavishly	mechanically	separately
absolutely	fervidly	miserably	sharply
actually	lively	mockingly	sheepishly
angrily	loosely	mostly	significantly
anxiously	loosely	naturally	slowly
arrogantly	fortunately	nearly	softly
assuredly	frankly	neatly	solidly
badly	frantically	nicely	steadily
beautifully	frankly	normally	strictly
beautifully	frequently	notably	stupidly
bravely	friendly	obviously	substantially
brightly	frightfully	occasionally	successfully
bristly	fully	openly	suddenly
broadly	fundamentally	orderly	surely
calmly	generally	patiently	surprisingly
carefully	generously	physically	suspiciously
certainly	gently	playfully	sympathetically
closely	ghastly	positively	tenderly
closely	ghostly	possibly	tentatively
cookingly	gradually	potentially	terribly
commonly	gratefully	powerfully	thoughtfully
completely	greatly	probably	thoughtfully
confidently	greedily	presumably	lightly
constantly	happily	primarily	immensely
continually	helpfully	probably	isumphantly
continuously	helplessly	properly	truly
coolly	highly	proudly	undeniable
correctly	hopefully	quently	uneasily
crossly	hopelessly	quickly	usually
curiously	immediately	quietly	utterly
dearly	increasingly	rapidly	vastly
deceitfully	innocently	readily	viciously
delightfully	intensely	readily	violently
diligently	intensely	reassuringly	virtually
distinctly	interestingly	regularly	warmly
dreamily	inwardly	relatively	wildly
eagerly	kindly	reassuringly	wildly
enormously	kindly	repeatedly	wildly
entirely	knighly	reproachfully	wildly
especially	knowingly	restfully	wildly
essentially	lightly	righteously	wonderfully
evenly	likely	rigidly	wildly
eventually	lonely	safely	wildly
evidently	longingly	safely	wildly
exactly	loudly	scarcely	wildly
socially	lovingly	searchingly	wildly
extremely	madly	sedately	wildly

PREPOSITIONS		
aboard	between	onto
about	beyond	opposite
above	by	out
according to	despite	outside
across	down	over
after	during	past
against	except	since
along	for	through
amid	from	throughout
among	in	to
around	inside	toward
aside from	instead	under
at	into	underneath
because of	like	unlike
before	minus	until
behind	near	up
below	of	upon
beneath	off	with
beside	on	within
		without

peers when conferencing and editing work together. In total, four more Sentence Starters and three more Enhancers will be presented in the next two issues of *Inside the Classroom*.

These strategies provide a starting point for improving writing skills and increasing confidence. Students will possess skills to reflect on their own work and have tools to make modifications. Over time, they will begin to participate more actively in the writing process, take more ownership of their own work, and have a heightened awareness of themselves as writers.