


A Philosophy of Teaching Writing

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Overview Procedure Resources Standards

Activities and Procedures:

My students undertake their study of heroes in the third quarter of a year of writing. They are confident about publishing their writing to the national audience of MY HERO because we have talked about effective style and worked on mastering mechanics through many different writing activities. I am always amazed at the developed and detailed writing freshmen can create, so I am probably even more confident than they are about showing what they can do to a national audience!

The specific types of writing my students do are not as important as the path we take with each assignment. My students write eight major pieces a year, interspersed with shorter, less detailed writing assignments. For each major writing assignment my students do, I build in four stages:

1. choice in topic while I limit the genre
2. specific grammar lessons on new skills
3. a study of published writing in the genre the students are tackling with the goal of discovering effective style techniques, such as engaging introductions, effective support integration, descriptive details, and conclusions that bring a piece to a satisfying end
4. publishing opportunities to an ever-widening audience (classmates, the student body, the community, ...)

Each of these pieces is a crucial step to developing students' love for and skills in writing.

Piece #1: Choice

At the end of each year, my students write reflective letters as introductions to their writing portfolios. Over the years, one thing students write again and again is how they really liked that I never told them what to write. This always gives me a good laugh because of course I told them what to write, but I did not tell them the subject they had to write about. It is through these student comments that I have come to understand the basic importance of giving students as much choice as possible when it comes to their writing. Through choice, students take ownership. This ownership leads to increased engagement in the writing process, and this in turn leads to better writing - period.

Piece #2: Grammar

At the school where I teach, our students do not have grammar textbooks; instead, they have writers' handbooks as references for grammar and mechanical skills. But, as I emphasize with parents at the start of every school year, this does not mean we do not teach grammar. For every major writing assignment, I have at least one full period of grammar instruction followed by a peer or self revision period to work on this new or review skill. I try to "jazz up" these lessons by creating funny stories about the students as our examples to correct, but they are truly traditional grammar lessons; I hold the students accountable for these skills throughout the year. While those select few master the skill right away, it takes the majority two or three papers to either understand the skill or to really believe that I will keep marking them down for inconsistent verb tenses. My students do not master all of the grammar skills we have in our ninth grade curriculum, but they have worked on each. Grammar confidence and mastery comes through focus, repetition, and cognitive development, so the students are off on the right track.

Piece #3: Style

The ninth grade course at Fredericksburg Academy is the typical freshman course focusing on the different genres. I have taken this organization and put a writing assignment at the end of each literature study, allowing the students to experience writing about what they just read. Therefore, when we read short stories, we are not only talking about the stories' themes and plots, but we are also looking at what introductions work well for us, what level of description is satisfactory but doesn't cross into burdensome, and the many other style traits of short stories. When we get to the MY HERO essays, the students read examples on the page, ranging from younger authors than themselves to adult authors.

This approach to the literature accomplishes two things. First, we are reading the literature to gain insight into the world around us, discussing the meanings and thoughts these works bring out in us. Second, we are also studying the literature for the very concrete reason of trying out some of the same style techniques ourselves. I find that my students who are lovers of reading enjoy both ways of approaching the literature, while my students who are still more literal and struggle with literary analysis enjoy seeing how they can learn as writers from what we read, even if the deeper meanings of the literature elude them.

Piece #4: Publishing

When students write for what they see as "real" audiences (i.e, pretty much anyone beyond their teacher!), their care for their writing takes on new urgency. For each writing assignment, I have built in a publishing opportunity, moving from publishing for classmates up to the national audience of MY HERO. Part of this process is also doing regular and focused peer evaluations, so from the start of the year, students are sharing their writing with at least one person other than me. I have had my share of bad peer evaluation experiences, ones where the partners say "Great!" As a result, I have developed concrete processes and questions for the students to teach them what types of suggestions they can offer to another writer. This first step of sharing with one classmate always makes at least of a few of my students very nervous, so it is an important step to publishing, even it is only to the class as a whole.

Conclusion

I do not want to sound like I take credit for inventing all of the ideas in my philosophy of teaching writing. But as I have "stolen" from many teachers I have had the fortune to know, I hope many of you can "steal" an idea or two from what I do. My students, as I see in their final reflective letters, leave the ninth grade feeling at least like competent writers, while many of them are actually enjoying writing, blossoming into full-fledged authors themselves. And I cannot ask for more of a success than that.