June Kamin

# WRITING: PAINTING WITH WORDS

The course I teach at a small four-year art school is one which is a catchall for a whole variety of students whose writing skills are weak. Their backgrounds are diverse. Some are inner-city Blacks, some Hispanics with varying degrees of Spanish language interference, others are Orientals (Korean and Chinese), not quite ESL students but still very much coping with the problems of acquiring our language, and still others are of European origin learning colloquial and written American rather than previously studied English literature. The rest are people who were just never taught expository writing in a variety of public and private schools. We spend one year struggling together, working together, preparing together for their entry into the world of college writing and, eventually, the world of business.

It is very difficult, I have found, for students to learn writing as an isolated skill. Because writing seems a more natural response to or outgrowth of the thinking and reading processes, it is important to give the student something to write about, raw information or processed information. Raw information is concrete, a teapot to describe and analyze in both form and function, a list of teen-aged heros to categorize and evaluate. Processed information is written matter, both fiction and non-fiction, which students discuss, analyze and write about. In either case we discuss information, and words are our basic units of communication. Groupings of spoken words, as every English teacher knows, are not necessarily sentences, and when writing, students must write in sentences. The student has to be taught paragraphing, because paragraphing is a written form, not a spoken one. In order for students to acquire the skills for the long essay-writing process that they must master in one short year, they must be given simultaneously the skills to write with and information to write about.

I work on vocabulary development as part of the whole writing process. Vocabulary development, word acquisition, when separate from

---

*June Kamin, who is working on a reading and writing workbook that stresses vocabulary skills, teaches writing and literature at the Parsons School of Design in New York City.*

DOI: 10.37514/JBW-J.1979.2.3.10 

the readings or discussions, merely becomes tiresome exercise to be gotten over in the quickest way possible, honestly or dishonestly. Even if the students would gladly work through mastery of word lists, could they easily find a way to include the memorized word or its definition in an essay? I think not. Word acquisition is for all of us very much part of the larger language process, not a game or an exercise done in a vacuum. In my class students increase their vocabularies out of the context of their readings and, almost unconsciously, incorporate new words into their writings.

When I teach writing skills, I work through three aspects of writing—word, sentence, and paragraph—from the first meeting. I teach paragraph-writing technique, which in turn is developed into a series of related paragraphs, the essay. I clarify and reinforce sentence usage and structure, of which each student does have some basic knowledge, and I continually emphasize the importance of words as the basic units of the entire process. Indeed, the only text that the student must purchase for my course is a good dictionary. The dictionary is used at each meeting of class either for word definition or spelling; it becomes a part of both the reading, input, process and the writing, output, process. Before the term is over students are usually amazed to find that they have actually worn it out, a comment on both the students' zeal and the quality of the product.

Early weeks of class are spent on observations and discussions of art, objects, popular performers, common experiences, and on writing about the discussed information. During this early period, I spend time introducing students to the dictionary. We discuss what strict alphabetical order is by examining a random page. I point out the function of guide words. We go over the key to pronunciation. We compare syllabification with the phonetic pronunciation of words chosen at random. We discuss "preferred" pronunciation and compare it with dialects we have in our class. We discuss Southern speech as well as any other dialect spoken in the room. We compare dialect word usage (flapjack vs. pancake; frying pan vs. skillet). We find differences in sound production from language to language (the rolled "r" and the absent English "j" sound in Spanish, gutteral sounds, etc.). Students do not mind playing such word games as long as they have plenty of their own information to play with.

During the early period, I keep my eye open for a well-written article in a magazine or newspaper on speech, pronunciation, dialect or language to make the transition from concrete to abstract, processed information. The other readings chosen are ones written for the educated reader, for the college student of the social sciences, or for the art historian. Later

the students will read English and American short stories. I begin short readings of pieces of one thousand or so words after they have been thoroughly informed as to what sentences are and what paragraphs look like and how they function, but long before everyone is writing trouble-free sentences or perfect paragraphs.

The first readings are read aloud in class, usually by me. The students are told to underline any word whose meaning is unclear or unknown to them. These underlined words are then to be looked up in their dictionaries and the meanings jotted down on the margins of their papers. Next, we go over the text, discussing its general meaning and examining paragraph formation. I ask the meanings of words which I believe might be unclear to them. It is at this point that students begin to see the difference between the dictionary definition and the author's contextual meaning and to see the differences among various dictionaries. We always try to determine the contextual meaning. Though I continually emphasize the need to keep orderly word lists (one for word acquisition and one for spelling), I find that students are reluctant to keep work sheets over an extended period of time. Word acquisition and spelling improvement come more easily out of the regular reading and writing assignments.

One exercise I use is eight to ten questions (based on the reading) which the students are to answer in correct sentence form. The exercise not only focuses on the important points of the reading and works on writing skills, it also incorporates the special vocabulary of the author. For example, we read an essay on the complexity of the speaking process itself, a social statement filled with physiological and technical explanations. The vocabulary is a mix: *benign, passive, cortex, larynx, vocal tract, articulate.* To merely list the words would be to burden the student with just another make-work assignment. Instead, I ask questions using the vocabulary of the author. "What is articulation?" "Explain phonation." It sounds dry, I know, yet in the context of the process it is interesting to think about and write about. They know just what articulation is so that when they are asked to write a paragraph examining the entire process of saying their own names, they are able to incorporate the word *articulation* and its meaning into the writing process. The writing combines what is well known to them: the complex process of speech they have unconsciously mastered, and the knowledge of it they have recently acquired.

It is most important for the writing teacher to realize that spelling is a special problem separate and yet not separate from writing. The teacher must help the student to organize and lay out ideas without damaging the

egos of those whose spelling is amazingly bad but whose minds are wonderfully bright. The teacher will find, once the organization and sentence structure problems decrease, that the spelling will be more manageable. It helps to have the student develop a uniform lettering system of writing. Often students disguise misspelled words in sloppy lettering. I continually emphasize that all they have to do is underline words that they cannot spell and look them up later and that lots of educated people can and do make spelling errors.

In this whole process, the dictionary is an important tool in the writing assignments, but it does not have the top priority. The writing priorities are organization (topic sentence followed by supporting information) and sentence structure (capitalization, punctuation, subject-verb agreement). Students are not to stop to look up a word and interrupt the flow of thinking and writing. They are told that a simple vocabulary is preferred in our language, but I find students want to use the vocabulary or terminology of the readings. It is when they are rewriting, rereading, or editing that they are asked to underline any word whose spelling or meaning is doubtful. When they are "finished" writing, then they can look up words or ask how to spell them.

In correcting student papers I note where words are used incorrectly or spelled incorrectly. The students must make corrections (look up the word) and note corrections on the spelling and word list they are so reluctant to keep. There are those students who make the *their-there, witch-which* mistakes continually. If the students are continually reminded pleasantly, I find they eventually do begin to see their own error patterns and can begin to correct themselves.

The thoughts run randomly
through the inner abyss.
There the flickering essence
of intelligence organizes in the mist.
The ignorant mind reels,
thinks to organize conflict and chaos.
"Oh!" the words sag and the logic fails,
the ideal dissipates in the infinite nebulous.

The above poem was given to me by a student some seven months into our ten-month term. I optimistically entitled it "Poem Number One" because I felt the young artist/author might become as committed to the language arts as he was to the fine arts. He is a young Hispanic who had

no facility with the language in September. His handwriting was unreadable, his spelling skills weak, his vocabulary sparse, his sentence structure covered the whole range of usual errors. His earliest writings were short; he hated to write. One spring day, he said that suddenly he realized that writing was like "painting with words." I wanted to hug him. No more would his "ignorant mind" struggle and fail. His "essence" would not "dissipate" into that "infinite nebulous" which is the tragic resting place of the ideas and ideals of students who have been failed by their teachers and their educational system.