

## TEACHING WRITING: A QUICK REFERENCE FOR THE WRITING TEACHER

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### ABSTRACT

Writing is the most important academic activity for teachers and students. It is the most fundamental communication skill that they have to teach and learn. This article is an attempt at a concise and compact expression of various approaches, strategies and techniques of writing in the form of a fresh re-telling of available materials designed for the ready reference of writing teachers.

*Hands, do what you're bid:  
Bring the balloon of the mind  
That bellies and drags in the wind  
Into its narrow shed.*

So wrote W. B. Yeats, in 1917, about the difficulty of getting one's floating and free-flying thoughts down on the page either in poetry or prose.

### Introduction

The ability to write clearly and logically is a much-valued accomplishment in the academic discourse community. Many writers, especially young learners, find that writing term papers and other academic assignments can be difficult tasks. They must realize that like most other skills, successful writing consists of a specific body of knowledge and specialized techniques. Equipping oneself with these features of writing is the only sure way of grounding oneself in academic and professional writing. The following is an attempt to sensitize the young and unskilled writers to what good academic writing is all about. It suggests writing practices from the perspectives of both theory and procedure, beginning with purposefulness in writing and taking learners through various other features before finally stressing revising procedures.

To begin with, having a good sense of purpose and audience provides scaffolding to better writing. Next, knowing the various kinds of writing and organizational techniques

helps identify a strategy for writing. Developing the thesis statement and organizing sentences help structure texts in a way readers can most easily grasp the unfolding prose. Such statements and sentences help to produce coherent paragraphs, which assist in thematizing the written communication. The skeletons are then filled in to provide the various forms of development (introduction, body, and conclusion paragraphs), then to be revised as the initial drafts emerge as the final products.

Writing is one of the most far-reaching elements of our life. It is one of the most satisfying too, for there is no greater satisfaction than to see our random thoughts given an organized and systematic form in written expression filling a blank page. We debate and discuss issues, engage in dialogue, argue over a matter, take sides, try to convince others, narrate a story, describe a scene, distinguish between two things by pointing out similarities and differences, and divide and classify objects into sets according to shared features or characteristics. When we are able to write a satisfactory critical analysis of our views concerning various aspects of, for instance, politics, religion, culture, academic programmes, sports, business, and current social events, using appropriate discourse skills or elements of certain rhetorical strategies, we not only feel but also experience a sense of achievement. There is a sense of great excitement in giving an outlet to our joys and sorrows, hopes and fears, what we like and dislike, and agree and disagree in our public or professional life.

Writing arises from our basic need to know our environment and ourselves. It is by writing that we try to discover or give an articulate voice to the meaning of life. We convey information, propagate knowledge, influence others, and give expression to our own thoughts and ideas through writing. We come to know people, society, culture and the world through writing. As Don Knefel (1986) says in *Writing and Life*:

*We write to communicate an ever-increasing volume of information. We write to discover significance, to explain things to others, to analyze and evaluate our products, our goals, our lives, our beliefs and ourselves. We write to effect change in the world, to convince others of the rightness of our point of view, to move others to actions we believe to be correct. And we write to express our sense of humour, our hopes, our dreads, and our dreams (p. 5).*

In short, texting of thought using a variety of discourse skills enables us to grow and expand as civilized human beings, helps us to realize our human potential for creativity, and motivates us to tap our inner resources in socially recognizable directions.

Like speech, writing is a vehicle of expression. It was not there when the ancient people communicated by verbal speech only, as it was not there when we learned to talk in our infancy. Written speech had to wait until the alphabet was invented and had to go through the stages of development as the rules of grammar, punctuation, sentence construction, syntax, and sequence of tenses were established. It went through further stages of development and sophistication as the idea of paragraph came into being and other parts of the written text (introduction, content and conclusion) were defined, identified, and practised. Thus, we see that writing evolved through a stylistic as well as structural process of its various units (such as word, sentence, paragraph) and its grammar and punctuation rules, each having its own important function.

### **The Act of Texting**

We express ourselves, share our feelings with others, and communicate knowledge and information to others either by writing or speaking. When we put something in writing in an ordered, systematic, organized, and articulate manner, using a certain discourse skill and keeping in mind our real or imagined readers, we create a text of our thought. Unlike our verbal speech, which, once spoken, vanishes in the air, leaving no trace of what we have said, written communication is a permanent record with an independent existence and status. We capture in words our tonal shifts, facial expressions, and other physical movements involved in verbal speech. We express in language our sense of humour, intimacy, anger, frustration, joy, hope, grief, protest, bitterness, doubt, interrogation, exclamation, loneliness, alienation, friendship, community, and connectedness. While verbal speech enables us to explain ourselves in the presence of our audience by allowing us to take our words back and make adjustments instantly if and when necessary, written communication does not have that advantage. We are not there in front of our readers to explain ourselves verbally if anything goes wrong or missing. This means that we have to express our ideas clearly in writing so that it can speak for us to our readers in our absence.

### **Texting As a Process**

Like all other professional and practical skills, writing also is a skill to be mastered as a process. "We master it through practice and the study of rules, and we learn how to execute certain forms: personal essays, research papers, critical arguments" (Knefel, 1986). Writing is also a creative art, which helps us to "become better writers by allowing the writing process itself to be a means of discovery, and the object of writing is less the mastery of forms than increased personal expressiveness" (Knefel, 1986). Thus, "by its very nature, writing is a blend of the practical and the creative. We always write with a purpose in mind, but work toward that aim through a creative process" (Knefel, 1986).

Therefore, the writer should not simply work toward realizing his/her goal, which is to write a finished product, but also see his/her writing as a creative process of discovery. As a course of modern academic study, writing is taught as an evolving process rather than a finished product, as a top-down rather than bottom-up exercise. It involves pre-writing or free writing, brainstorming, drafting, revising, and proofreading before it is given a final shape. Elizabeth Cowan Neeld opens her preface to her book *Writing* (1986) with a quotation from a French academician:

“There are stages in bread-making quite similar to the stages of writing. You begin with something shapeless, which sticks to your fingers - a kind of paste. Gradually that paste becomes more and more firm. Then there comes a point when it turns rubbery, a point when you feel it’s time to stop kneading. You sense that the yeast has begun to do its work: the dough is alive. Then all you have to do is let it rest.”

Similarly, the writing process unfolds through the “Creating Stage”, “Shaping Stage”, and “Completing Stage”. As it goes through these various stages, the piece of writing addresses and accommodates the informative and analytical responses to the questions such as “Who?” “What?” “Why?” “How?” and “When?” until it finally comes to be a completed and unified work in content, style, and organization.

Theoretically, our writing is never a finished product because it can always be revised, changed, edited, enlarged, or shortened. Practically, however, it does need to become a completed piece of work. With that end in view we give finishing touches to it before it is ready to be presented to our readers. Since the practice of writing is a process-oriented matter, sometimes we may not know what we are going to write about before we actually start writing or what we are going to end up with. We begin with whatever comes to our mind, jotting down a few words and trying to sketch out some details as we freewrite at the preliminary stage. We should not let our sense of fear or inertia overcome us. Instead, those states of mind should be overcome to get started on with free writing without really caring for, to begin with, what we are writing. Even sitting down with pen and paper without a prior idea of what we are going to write helps.

### **Getting Started**

One of the best and most friendly ways to overcome the difficulty of getting started is to write about our personal experiences, narrating stories of our personal life and describing our personal experiences such as memorable days of childhood, student life, family occasions, community events, people we know of in our everyday life or in our neighborhood, friends and relatives. If possible, we should introduce a bit of drama or dialogue into our narrative or description to make it exciting, lively and vivid. Such writing about individual experiences is called subjective writer-based prose, which is an

effective means of developing our writing skills. In other words, we start out with non-fictional expressive writing like personal essays, autobiographical memoirs, diaries, journal entries, and so on. Personal essays and expressive narratives make our life come alive on the page.

Another way is to imagine role-playing and play with our social self. We can imagine ourselves playing a role in a real-life social situation and then turn it into a rhetorical situation in which we imaginatively demonstrate a degree of emotional or intellectual sensitivity. Imaginative role-playing helps us turn the social situation into a writing situation. It helps us come up with materials to write about and adopt a rhetorical stance which makes it easier for us to think. Once we sit down with pen and paper we let the process of texting our thought in motion and mould it according to our purpose.

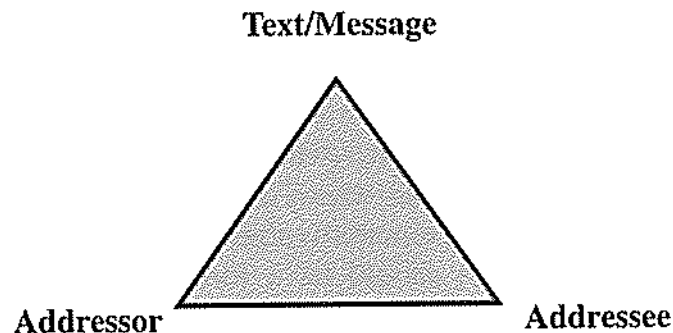
### **Sense of Purpose**

Since we are expected to be able to write about many subjects according to some standard practices and for many different kinds of readers, writing with a purpose and for an audience are two important considerations we have to take into account. Either we know before we sit down to write, what to write about and why or we discover the purpose as we are in the process of writing the first draft. Our purpose becomes clearer and more defined as we go through the processes of more brainstorming, redrafting, and revising. Without a sense of purpose, there cannot be a focus; without a focus, our writing is going to be loose and diffuse, not tight and articulate. It is the sense of focus which helps us select our materials and organize them into paragraphs. In much the same way, “defining your purpose in advance,” to quote a writing scholar, “will help you choose what to include and how to approach your subject. For example, if you want to entertain, you might choose humorous events and informal language to achieve that goal. If you intend to persuade, you might choose ideas and words that appeal to both reason and emotion”.

### **Sense of Audience**

Similarly, the sense of audience is also very important. The writer should know who his/her readers are: their age, gender, education, profession, race, religion, and cultural background. One’s choice of style and expression depends, to a large extent, on the kind of audience one is addressing. If we write something with the business community in mind, our style is going to be different from when we write for the academic community. Our writing for children or young teenagers is different from what we write for adults. Other factors to consider to make our writing interesting and effective are the level of education, position in life, religious background, and the gender of our readers. The

intended audience plays an important role especially during the shaping stage when we feel that we are under commitment to make our writing really communicative to others. We have to keep in mind that we are addressing an issue to an audience and that we are an addressor addressing a message to our addressee. Robert Scholes, in *The Practice of Writing* (1981), graphically illustrates this by means of the communication triangle as shown below:



“Developing a sense of audience is a mark of maturity,” writes Helen Gordon in *Developing College Writing* (Gordon, 1989:3). We reach a certain level of that maturity as we move from our first audience, who are probably our family and friends, to our lecturers or instructors, members of a group we belong to, and to a variety of audiences whom we may have never seen but we can imagine them as having similar interests as us. It matters whether we are addressing a specific or a general audience because our audience awareness affects the substance and style of our writing. As Gordon (1989) puts it:

*The ability to put yourself in another’s place is crucial to writing effectively. You should think about your readers before you begin to write, because your writing will be shaped by your perceptions of what your readers need to know about your topic. For example, if you are writing a story for children, you will choose a subject that interests them, use simple words, and keep your sentences short. If, however, you are writing for your colleagues, you will choose a topic of interest to adults, use a mature vocabulary, and vary your sentence structure to fit the ideas you want to convey (p. 3).*

### **Kinds of Writing**

Writing can be of many kinds: personal, impersonal, subjective, objective, analytical, informative, narrative, descriptive, comparative, argumentative, academic, journalistic,

satirical, and persuasive. It depends on what we want to say and how, what our purposes and who our readers are. We insert bits of dialogue here and there, and use various rhetorical strategies such as definition, division, classification, illustration, comparison, contrast, induction, and deduction as they suit our need. While an essay can primarily be in one particular mode of expression in its overall approach, it may have elements of several modes in it with its different parts or paragraphs written according to different stylistic features.

### **Introduction of the Text or Thesis Statement**

Thus, everything in writing has a function to serve. We find the right word for the right expression, place the right sentence where it is appropriate, put a comma, a semicolon, a colon, a hyphen or a dash where it belongs. The introductory paragraph in an expository/analytical or argumentative/persuasive writing (term papers or writing assignments, for instance) should be a forceful presentation of the central argument of the essay. It is an elaboration of the title of the essay just as the rest of the essay is a development or defence or an explanation of it. It is supposed to have a thesis statement to be articulated in a sentence or a few. Every essay has a point to make, which is called "thesis" and which gives direction to it. The word "thesis" comes from a Greek word referring to the position that an author defends or proves. "The thesis is to the theme what the topic sentence is to the paragraph," says Gordon (1989), who continues: "Like the topic sentence, it may be either explicit (directly stated) or implicit (indirectly stated or implied). Also like the topic sentence, the thesis must contain some idea that requires support or proof; it cannot be a statement of fact. It can, however, have a broader scope than a topic sentence, because a longer paper allows for fuller development" (p. 107).

Knefel's observations about the thesis statement explain the matter more usefully. Having defined the informal essays as more personal, expressive, or experimental and as less practical, informational, analytical, or persuasive, he says that they are more likely to avoid the strict conventions or traditional formalities such as the statement or placement of thesis, introduction, conclusion, or any other techniques. Whereas, "In formal essays," to quote Knefel (1986), "this focus [i.e., the thesis] usually appears early, after an introductory passage that seeks to draw the reader in, to capture his or her interest.... The advantage of placing the thesis early is that the reader knows clearly what the essay will attempt to do. We can follow its development while keeping the thesis in mind as a sort of map. Complex or difficult subjects often demand this structure" (p.25) for, the thesis statement, which "should set forth a single, unified train of thought," is the key to the rest of the essay (p.84).

We may want to skip the introductory or lead section of our essay by drafting the body paragraphs first. If we do so, we are taking a chance in that we may get out of focus and be drifting. If we decide to write the introduction first to state or imply our controlling idea, it will help us keep the body “unified and on track...stay in control of the whole.” As we draft the introduction we have to keep in mind that we need to capture our reader’s interest before anything else.” As a rule of thumb,” Kniefel says (1986: 83), “it makes sense to angle the topic specifically toward the common ground between reader and subject,” i.e., the reader’s interests, concerns, or needs and the suitable or interesting aspects of your subject. One point to remember: the introductory part (or paragraphs) has its own introductory techniques and conclusion. After opening with “a question, a startling fact, an anecdote, a flat or blunt statement, a quotation, or a definition” or a combination of “two or more devices for an extended introduction,” an expected “direct statement of your thesis should conclude your introduction.” You are giving some extra emphasis to your main point by placing it at the end of the introductory section.

It should be mentioned that, according to Kniefel (1986), sometimes writers choose to leave the thesis of the essay implied by saying enough in the introduction so that the thesis can be easily inferred by the reader. In such a case, the thesis is directly stated in the conclusion of the essay. Since making the readers infer what you mean can be more difficult than telling them straight, it is practical to become proficient first with the straightforward method. Once you have mastered the technique of stating your ideas directly, you will be ready to try your hand at other, more refined or sophisticated approaches (p. 84).

### **The Middle or Body of the Essay**

The succeeding paragraphs, which form the body of the essay, analyze and illustrate, defend or develop the main argument. They are to follow each other in a logically consistent manner with a proper transition from the one to the next. In other words, we need to develop our ideas in logically connected paragraphs with no jump from one unit of thought to another. The connection between the paragraphs is to be clearly implied in sense or, if necessary, be made clear by transitional expressions, which provide a lead-in from the preceding paragraph to the following one. The paragraphs should be unified by a single topic and developed with detailed support. Kniefel (1986:85) goes on to add that it is especially important in a first draft to let paragraphs unfold so as to give them room. The more details are included the first time around, the more revision needs to be done. The effective use of transitional markers to connect paragraphs as well as sentences within a paragraph will help to keep readers focussed as the text unfolds.



## **Paragraphing**

Many of us may not have a clear idea of what a paragraph is. It is the most important physical feature of the body of our essay. While we may have a very short, even a single-line paragraph in our personal, narrative, expressive, or creative writings, our paragraphs in a formal academic assignment should be developed to full length and unified by the point made in it. Each paragraph should establish a unit of thought, using various elements of the rhetorical patterns mentioned above. There should not be more than one idea expressed in one paragraph. Otherwise, it will create unnecessary complication and make it difficult to convey our message across to our readers. We should remember that all ideas developed in an essay must cohere and correlate with each other and be in support of the main idea presented in its introductory part. At no point in our essay should we get out of focus. In other words, the middle of the essay should serve a supportive role to the main thesis by coherently analyzing and illustrating thoughts and ideas focused to the principal argument, which thus runs through and unifies the essay.

Like the essay, there are many patterns of paragraph development. Paragraphs can be developed according to various discourse skills and rhetorical strategies. They can be developed by definition, explanation, description, narration, classification, examples, and illustration. Accordingly, there can be a definition paragraph, illustration paragraph, narrative paragraph, and descriptive paragraph. It is a common practice to combine narration and description, comparison and contrast, cause and effect and division and classification. As we develop as writers, we will discover how to distinguish between fact and opinion, and avoid clichés, jargon and sweeping or hasty generalizations.

## **Topic Sentence and Sentence Structure**

Each paragraph should have a topic sentence, placed either at its beginning or in the middle or at the end, the rest of it being an analysis or a clarification of the point made in the topic sentence. If the thesis statement in the introduction is the head of the text (to draw an analogy from the human anatomy), the topic sentences in the paragraphs are its backbones. The remainder is the fleshing out of our topic or sub-topics. Although all paragraphs should be well developed, they may vary in length and style. In order to make our writing effective and lively, we choose our words and phrases carefully; taking into account their denotative and connotative meanings. We vary our style with simple and complex sentences, parallel constructions, compound and balanced sentences, subordination and coordination, right-branching and left-branching sentences, introductory phrases, modifiers, appositives, and loose and periodic sentences.

Emphasizing variety in length, Helen Gordon (1989) says: "If all your sentences are short and simple, the effect is choppy, monotonous, and immature. This kind of style is called *primer style* because it resembles the style of the books that teach young children to read. On the other hand, if all your sentences are long and full of modifiers, the result is a convoluted style that may be confusing to your readers.... Most of your sentences should be of medium length, but an occasional short sentence, following some longer sentences, can be emphatic" (p. 75). As we write various kinds of sentences, we must be careful about the placement of modifiers, consistency in tenses, and choice of active or passive voice.

### **Concluding the Essay**

The conclusion of the essay should be a well-written restatement of the whole argument, marking the formal closure of the piece and leaving the reader convinced of the writer's thesis with a sense of his satisfactory performance. This final part, according to Knefel, typically sums up the analysis of the writer's thoughts and ideas presented in the essay. As it sums up the whole, it may also rise to offer a prediction or recommendation, give a final illustration, or even close with a question, or in some way leave the reader with an emphatic, unexpected, or memorable sense of the main point of the essay. Knefel (1986) reiterates: "Conclusions may employ a number of the techniques used in introductions (questions, anecdotes and quotations, for instance), or they can send the reader off with a forecast or prediction, a final summary statement, or a memorable turn of phrase. Some essays have ringing conclusions, and for others the last word falls with a loud thud" (p. 85).

The conclusion is the writer's last chance to have an effect on his audience. So it needs to be thought out carefully. It is suggested that the writer draft a number of alternative conclusions just as he should do so when writing the introduction. "Try to listen to the essay's own impulse. Does it seem to want to end in a special way? Is there a natural way to end it? ... And think of your conclusion as your signature. Make your conclusion honest and forthright. This is your work, after all. Your name is attached to it. Try to speak so that your reader will remember you and your essay, and so that you yourself will remember it" (Knefel, 1986: 85).

### **Writing Sequence**

Finally, a recent method in teaching texting of thought and discourse skills is sequenced writing or writing in sequence. For instance, suppose there was a devastating fire or a fatal road accident or a prize-giving ceremony or a debate competition or a football match or a function on the occasion of a royal visit. A writing sequence may be developed

on any such topic by varying the purpose and audience. We can write a letter to describe the event or incident to a close friend or our parents who are far away; we can also prepare a report for the local newspaper and yet another report for the insurance company. We can also keep a diary for future reference. In each case, we adopt a different persona with a different tone: emotional, casual, formal, practical, balanced, familiar, ironic or satirical. Each time our approach is different just as our purpose and audience are different and we are careful what to include and exclude. Depending on what our purpose is and who our audience is, we can be descriptive and detailed or forthright and objective. Our emphases will differ according to the needs of our readers.

### **Revision**

One last word about the texting of thought and discourse skills is the very important step of revision in our composing process. Whatever we write can be refined and improved by revision. There is always room for further polishing of our content and organization. Whether we write to share, entertain, convince, or inform, we should not consider our writing to be finished until after the revision is done. This involves checking for incoherence, wordiness, redundancies, repetitions, and imprecise use of words and grammatical errors. Sometimes revision can become so significant and extensive that it amounts to large scale rewriting and reorganizing of the text. As Vincent Ruggiero (1986) says in *The Art of Writing*:

*Revising does not just mean adding things. It also means deleting, changing, and rearranging ... to eliminate the weakness or flaw involved (p.316).*

From major restructuring to minor mechanical problems and simple corrections, all these come under revision. In short, our work, after the first and second drafts, must not be left unrevised. The process of revision must not be undermined or neglected in any way. It is a necessary step in our way to achieving accuracy, precision, liveliness and effectiveness.

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