Writing: The Forbidden Task
BY INEZ KETRON

Every teacher is aware of the decline of writing skills in modern society. No doubt, we teachers often experience a tinge of guilt when the subject arises. We know that our students should write more. We know the advantages of including essay questions on our subject tests. We know that writing is best mastered when utilized across subject lines. We know that the best way to learn effective writing skills is to write. We know that higher level thinking goes hand-in-hand with expressing opinions, ideas, and applications in writing. But, we also know that we have subject content to cover, tests to administer, meetings to attend, extracurricular activities to supervise, lesson plans to develop, parents to counsel, special needs students to assist, families to serve, and churches in which to minister. And to make it more interesting, there are only twenty-four hours in each day.

So Why Try?

What is the solution? How can the already overworked teacher realistically add writing skills to his list of classroom objectives? The true solution to balancing writing assignments in the classroom with other teacher responsibilities begins with a commitment to each student, progresses with an understanding of the basic principles behind writing skills, and culminates with a conscious effort to incorporate writing into every discipline taught. Bluntly put, the solution requires work and more work.

Commitment

As Christian teachers, we are bombarded with the demands of commitment. As uncomfortable and tiring as it might seem, this is the bottom line in the classroom. A teacher who is not genuinely committed will not be successful or satisfied in the classroom. A close, obedient relationship with Christ, a genuine pursuit of the knowledge required to teach, and a willingness to serve or go the extra mile for your students are essential for each teacher.

I am a classroom teacher and I understand what I am saying. I, too, go home overwhelmed and exhausted on occasion. But I have discovered this condition forces me to depend on Christ. Frankly, teaching is of little effect if not offered as an outgrowth of a personal relationship with Christ. Thus the challenges of the classroom motivate one to pursue all that Christ can provide to fulfill the responsibilities of Christian teaching and living. If a genuine commitment is in place, then expanding one’s curriculum to include a necessary skill is a secondary decision. This does not mean a never-ending sixteen-hour workday or an existence that does not allow opportunities to enjoy God’s blessings. It does mean that a teacher is willing to do what is best for his students and to continue growing in the instructional skills that will enable his students to perform at optimum.
A Major But Unrealistic Obstacle

Some teachers hesitate to teach or to assign original writing because they believe that unless they teach English they do not possess the skills necessary for teaching composition. Hog wash! There are two ways of overcoming this. First, remember no one knows everything; so, if necessary, do not hesitate to ask the English teacher for assistance. Second, invest in a good grammar book and/or dictionary or borrow them, and use these resources in the teaching and assessing process. Remember, every teacher had to develop and practice writing skills to make it through college; this is a sufficient foundation for teaching writing skills. Even the infamous English teacher must keep learning and improving in his field to continually teach writing effectively.

Principles To Remember

The teaching of writing skills cannot be separated from the principles which dictate what and how we teach. It is important to consider three basic principles when teaching writing skills. These include:

1. Writing is a natural, necessary extension of a student’s verbal development.

2. Writing should be incorporated into the daily life of every student.

3. Writing instruction should be a balance of allowing personal creativity and requiring correct mechanics.

“Make clear to the children that writing is an extension of powers they already have . . . namely, the powers of speech” (Holt, 1989, p. 35). This statement reiterates principle one. In our society, writing is a natural outgrowth of speaking. Writing is not optional; it is a progression of the spoken word. A wonderful motivator in this realm is helping students see that writing increases the value of their words, the influence of their ideas, and the extent of their audience. Hand in hand with principle one is principle two. If writing is a natural expansion of speaking, then it must be a part of everyday life just like the spoken word. Students should have teachers who model writing. Provide varied and frequent opportunities for students to express themselves in writing.

Principle three is critical; for this is the area where students often become discouraged instead of growing and maturing into successful writers who utilize a balance of creativity and mechanics. “Most adults think children can’t write until they successfully complete spelling, punctuation, and grammar exercises. But children can best learn these skills in the context for which they were intended: writing” (Graves, 1985. p. 3). Many teachers believe that to write, a student first must master the elements of grammar and spelling. It is better that students learn the rules by employing them as they are required. The mastery of grammar, punctuation, and spelling is not a prerequisite to composition, but the product of much writing. When a student sees that punctuation, correct spelling, and expressive vocabulary are necessary to clarify his
personal ideas, the motivation to apply correct mechanics affects even the most hesitant author. The ideal is a balance between creative expression and correct mechanics; one promotes the other.

**Where To Begin**

The teacher’s commitment and understanding now branch into the practical implementations necessary to begin or to enrich the teaching of writing skills in the classroom. It is not and should not be a mammoth task. Incorporating writing into a class is best for students and teachers when done one small step at a time. Generally there are many small changes that can make writing in your classroom a more frequent occurrence. It can be as simple as adding one new assignment a semester, adjusting a current assignment to emphasize the written product, or adding just one well-written essay question to each test.

The creative teacher anxious to provide opportunities for writing may find it helpful to streamline writing assessment. One possibility is to emphasize only one or two skills in some writing assignments. For example, a class might write an assigned paragraph and the assessment would be based solely on the correct use of punctuation, or the suitable use of new vocabulary words, or the clear expression of a particular academic concept or historical event. A second option in this realm might be peer assessment. This is a frequently overlooked tool that teachers can use to allow students to write more without incurring additional work for themselves. The key for success in using this technique is to provide precise, specific guidelines for the student evaluators to follow. Peer assessment of written assignments can be an effective mechanism for reteaching both the reader and the writer in mechanics and content.

Another shortcut for efficient writing assessment is to have students write compositions, then read their compositions to the class. Such assignments serve as excellent reinforcements of the lessons for the writers, speakers, and listeners. The teacher can readily assess mastery of concepts during the oral presentation and can emphasize some basic rules for speaking in front of a group.

A practical training tool in teaching writing is the rough draft. Help students improve writing skills by requiring a rough draft for every written assignment. This requires no more of the teacher’s time and forces students to examine what they have written. They will correct errors and enrich their expression in spite of themselves.

Daily writing practice in the classroom can be done productively through the use of student journals. Teachers could accelerate assessment by examining only selected entries, by evaluating only one or two aspects of the written piece, or even by having students evaluate themselves on concepts specified by the teacher. Of course, journals can be used in English classes, but are easily adaptable to the history, music, or science class. They can be very useful in helping students understand the events, people, and concepts being studied. Journals also work very well with the elementary age student. Even prereaders can create journals in early grades by drawing pictures.
representing their entries. Students can then dictate the story behind the picture to a teacher or aide who will write it down. The motivation of seeing his own words in print is an extraordinary inspiration to the beginning writer.

Subject By Subject

The following suggestions provide a starting point for teaching writing skills in a variety of disciplines at a myriad of academic levels. Mixing, matching, and creativity are encouraged.

Art:

1. Plan and create cartoon strips with dialogue.
2. Design an advertisement including ad copy for a fictional product.
3. Compose a paragraph using pictures in place of nouns.
4. Design greeting cards including messages.

Bible:

1. Summarize a sermon or chapel message.
2. Paraphrase a particular Bible passage.
3. Develop a crossword puzzle on a particular subject or unit.

Business:

1. Create a personal newspaper practicing layout and typing. Include articles about personal interests, editorials, puzzles, news reports on family events, etc.
2. Write friendly and business letters. Have students write thank you notes, requests, editorial responses, etc.

Drama:

1. Pantomime an activity and have student observers write a description.
2. Compose an original skit for a school event such as homecoming, graduation, or senior day.
3. Paraphrase a play or part of a play written in Elizabethan English.

Health or Physical Education:

1. Choose a particular sports figure and write a biography.
2. Provide students with slips of paper containing a single sentence on the rules of a particular game or some health rule. Have them put sentences together in
the appropriate order.

Family Living:

1. Develop a chronological plan for a reunion, a cookout, or a birthday party including menus.
2. Read and analyze advertisements for household items; write responses after use.
3. Write a detailed recipe of a favorite dish.
4. Critique a particular meal or dish; include information on nutrient content.
5. Design illustrations and compose messages for cards to distribute to a nursing home or hospital for a particular occasion.

Foreign Languages:

1. Study and write original forms of poetry in the language.
2. Compose stories in the language.
3. Write reports on great individuals from the culture being studied.
4. Create travel brochures for the foreign country of language being studied.

Mathematics:

1. Create rhymes or verses to explain basic mathematics rules or concepts.
2. Write a detailed description of a particular mathematics operation.
3. Research the lives of great mathematicians and write reports about them.

Music:

1. Compose love songs to friends and family members.
2. Develop the title and words of a song into a story.
3. Listen to a piece of music and write a story inspired by the music.
4. Create original music for the celebration of particular holidays and occasions.

Social Studies:

1. Write a first person account of a particular historical event.
2. Compose a character sketch of a favorite historical figure.
3. Keep a daily journal of a particular period of history as if involved in the actual events.

4. Present a newscast on a major historical event or current event. Include the facts, interviews, expert analysis, etc.

5. Develop original editorials in response to current news stories and submit to local papers.

**Science:**

1. Create an actual book or magazine of at least eight-ten pages on a particular area of science including information on scientists, illustrations, research findings, charts, etc. Writers can design cover, develop advertisements, create puzzles and features that fit the overall subject.

2. Develop a cause and effect paragraph. For example, someone pushes the button on the doorbell. Writer explains what happens electronically.

3. Provide writers with initial sentence and allow them to expound upon a subject based on material that is being taught and studied.

4. Blindfold student and have him hold a particular type of tool, then write a detailed description.

These ideas are just a jumping-off point. None of these activities is limited to the area in which it is listed. Writing is an incredibly flexible activity for any subject at any grade level. Do not hesitate combining writing with other activities; this often creates interesting learning agents custom designed for your students, their academic needs, and your personal teaching objectives.

**General Assessment**

An area of concern for most teachers is fair and constructive assessment of the final product. Written work can and should be evaluated in several areas. Assignments can be limited to a particular aspect of learning as mentioned before, but frequently the written work will need to be assessed more thoroughly. Four basic areas in the written assignment requiring evaluation are components, content, mechanics, and creativity. Depending on the expectations of the assignment, any area can be stressed or minimized in the evaluation.

A key point in successfully evaluating students’ written products is to carefully consider and to precisely instruct students in what is necessary to meet the requirements of the assignment. Before the assignment is given to students, the teacher should have determined the whats, hows, and specific objectives of the assignment. What the teacher will be looking for should not be a mystery to the students. The considerations of the teacher’s assessment should be a common component in the instructions explaining the assignment.

An assessment list can be most helpful to teachers in this area. A teacher decides exactly what to require in the specific assignment and makes a list. Each item on the list is then assigned a particular number of points in accordance with the emphasis of the assignment.
After the development of the list, its content can be adjusted to emphasize whatever the teacher desires, and it becomes a simple matter to assign points for each category of the assignment. This sample can be adapted for use in grading any type of assignment at any academic level. In fact, one school secretary has actually created an assessment list for field trips. Obviously, categories can be detailed or general, and as varied as the student, teacher, or assignment.

The assessment list can also serve as a valuable instructional tool. By providing students a copy of the actual list the teacher will use in assessing a particular assignment, students then have a tool to determine if they are meeting the given requirements of the assignment. When a student is beginning a class or tackling a new kind of assignment, the assessment list can provide definite guidance and alleviate confusion. Following the grading process, a teacher should provide students the completed assessment list that will help students analyze their strengths and weaknesses in the completion of a particular assignment.

Conclusion

The necessity, responsibility, basic instructional techniques, and governing principles for teaching our students to write often, effectively, and successfully have been sketched out. It cannot be overstated that this particular article is simply an initiation. However, the information presented can serve as a skeletal foundation for an effective writing format to any teacher who is willing to embark upon the “forbidden task” of instructing students in the golden, essential art of writing.

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References