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**Special Focus:
Writing Skills**

An Emphasis on Process from Assignment Through Assessment

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Introduction

Successful writers show awareness of their audience and approach composition as a **nonlinear process**. Distilled from research on second-language writing (Magnan 1985, Zamel 1982), these words are among the most repeated of language teachers' mantras. To help students become successful writers in a second language (and across the curriculum), teachers create assignments informed by a cognitive process theory and its practical implications (Flower and Hayes 1981, Barnett 1989). This approach emphasizes the writing process and not just a final written product. It makes sense, but how does it work? And how is it working?

In a class committed to process writing, students prepare compositions in multiple drafts, often incorporating prewriting, peer-editing, and self-editing guides. Since student editing raises a number of problems (e.g., overlooking mistakes and introducing new ones), teachers also review first drafts, identifying errors to be corrected, providing thoughtful commentary, and offering reactions, advice, and encouragement in marginal notes. It is therefore disappointing to see students furtively skimming these drafts for circled mistakes and written comments in order to plug in revisions as quickly as possible. Weary teachers might well ask themselves: whose process is it?

Flower and Hayes clearly distinguish **stage models** of writing from a **cognitive model** (367–368), emphasizing that writing in linear stages (prewriting, composing a draft, revising a draft), while a useful approach, does not automatically foster cognitive processes. In other words, students writing in stages might indeed rewrite, rethink, and clarify meaning, but only in discrete units and in disconnected phases. A draft-and-editing process can become for students (and teachers) no more than a labor-intensive way to organize a highly **linear** (not cognitive) process: there is no guarantee that a writer working in linear stages will constantly replan, rethink, reassess goals, rewrite, and clarify meaning throughout and across stages. It is no wonder teachers become discouraged when they find themselves applying these cognitive strategies to students' writing while the students do not.

What, then, can teachers do to help students hone the skills of a good writer? How can

students become more engaged in cognitive process? This article offers practical solutions for building attention to this process within the familiar structure of a **stage writing model**. It involves no more than a revision of three tools normally used when assigning compositions: the **description of the assignment itself, editing guides, and grading criteria**. When these three elements work together toward a common goal, reinforcing one another through shared wording, students are more likely to understand and practice process writing.

Defining Goals

Ideally, students should ask themselves several questions throughout the composition process; they should apply most of these questions equally, often, and simultaneously to matters of form and meaning:

- Who are my (real or fictive) readers? How do I reach them? What will confuse, distract, or tire them? How can I appeal to these readers, make myself clear, make my writing interesting?
- What is the purpose of this writing task? What am I trying to do: convince, persuade, amuse, list facts, give instructions?
- What are my editorial responsibilities?

The first and second groups of questions highlight awareness of the reader and attention to the communicative task. All matters of grammatical accuracy, stylistics, organization, and rhetoric ideally serve these purposes. Writers should keep these questions in mind throughout the composition process. The question of editorial responsibility is a practical but equally important one, usually considered right at the beginning so that writers may budget their time and just before turning in the final product or any drafts along the way.

While each writing assignment targets specific goals, the underlying purpose of writing pedagogy is to focus students on these basic questions. Thus it is important to repeat, rephrase, clarify, and reinforce these questions throughout the stages of the linear writing process, from the wording of the assignment through the explanation of assessment criteria.

Wording the Assignment

The first step in reinforcing writing goals is to articulate them in the very wording of the assignment. For example, imagine that students have watched and discussed the film *Kirikou et la sorcière* and are ready to write a composition related to it. The composition assignment boils down to this: "Write a review of the film *Kirikou et la sorcière*." We can fine-tune this assignment by asking the same sorts of questions we hope students will ask themselves and by reflecting these questions in the wording of the assignment itself.

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Teacher Task: Rephrasing the Assignment to Reflect Its Goals

Assignment: Write a review of *Kirikou et la sorcière*.

Who is the implied reader?

You have been asked to write a review of the film *Kirikou et la sorcière* for a student newspaper.

What is the functional task?

Convince your student readers that this children's film is either appropriate or inappropriate for their age group.

How can this review be structured to carry out functional and communicative goals and to reach the implied reader?

Begin with a brief introduction supplying basic information about the film (year, genre, director, popularity). Make your case by discussing first the style of the film (images and music, for example), then the plot and its message. Remember that we read reviews to get general information and a critique of the film, not to learn the entire plot and, above all, not to be told the ending.

What language can serve these goals?

The present tense is normally used in reviews of books and films. In a film review, it is appropriate to address the reader directly with rhetorical questions. The imperative and subjunctive moods are useful in persuasive writing.

What are the editorial demands?

Write 150 words, typed, double-spaced. [Include due dates and any other administrative guidelines for each draft.]

Appendix A offers a sample checklist for teachers planning writing assignments.

Prewriting

Prewriting activities need not be limited to drafting sentences and paragraphs. Examining model texts, discussing their own preferences as readers, and brainstorming approaches to the assignment will all promote critical thinking about students' writing. If time allows, have students read a film review. Ask them to identify effective strategies the writer uses to keep the readers' attention, to make points, and to be persuasive. In small groups, have students put themselves in the place of target readers. Ask them think about and discuss where they look for film reviews, what information they hope to find, and what types of reviews they like best and why. If time does not permit either of these prewriting

activities, take five minutes to lead a brainstorming session directly linked to the wording of the assignment and map answers on the board: What kinds of sentences get the reader's attention? What does the reader need to know about the plot? What expressions could help persuade the reader?

Peer Reviewers, Not Peer Graders

It is tempting to abandon peer editing altogether. Students often feel uneasy, threatened, and defensive when their manuscripts are criticized by their peers, and they have limited faith in the credibility of such feedback (Amores 1997). While conscientious students resent having to clean up the work of more careless students, weaker students are embarrassed by their mistakes. And across the board, peer editors introduce new errors in an attempt to be helpful. Yet what is more valuable to a writer than having her work read and critiqued before publication?

Perhaps “peer editing” is a misnomer. Neither writers nor readers glean great rewards from “editing” each other’s work in language classes. However, reading for comprehensibility, clarity, flow, and style is a real-life task that emphasizes the dialogical relationship between reader and writer while promoting reflection and analytical thinking. When peer review is guided not toward editing and evaluating but instead toward identifying effective writing strategies and need for clarity, everyone benefits from the process. In fact, *reviewing* manuscripts may be more beneficial to students’ writing than *being reviewed*. Give peer reviewers just one or two questions of style and readability closely related to the communicative function (Which paragraph did you find the most persuasive and why? Is there a sentence or a paragraph you do not understand?) and leave the editing to the writer and instructor.

Appendix B offers a checklist for teaching, assigning, and grading drafts with editing guides.

Self-Editing

Like peer-editing guides, self-editing guides may feel like a burden if they are limited to a checklist of grammar points and editorial requirements. Writing—even in one’s native language—provokes anxiety, leads to procrastination, and stirs self-doubt. Self-editing that is not just focused on accuracy allows students an outlet for their anxiety about writing, as it offers explicit guidelines toward rethinking and rewriting compositions. Consider dividing the self-editing guide into three parts: an editorial checklist, a language focus, and a pause for reflection on the writing process. Including a brief editing guide for each draft draws further attention to process and progress.

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Student Task 1: A Sample Self-Editing Checklist for the First Draft

Editorial focus:

Assignment turned in on time following format guidelines [number of pages, etc.]

Checked spelling and accents

Checked conjugations and basic agreements of nouns and verbs, nouns and adjectives

Sample language focus [one or two per essay]:

- Name two types of structures or sentences you used to persuade the reader.
- What rhetorical questions did you use to engage the reader?

Possible questions for reflection about the writing process [just one or two per essay]:

- What was the most challenging part of this essay?
- What do you think you accomplished best?
- What would you like to work on as you revise this essay?
- Are you happy with how, when, and where you worked on this essay?

Student Task 2: A Sample Self-Editing Checklist for the Final Draft

Editorial checklist:

Assignment turned in on time following format guidelines [number of pages, etc.]

Checked spelling and accents

Addressed corrections and clarifications suggested by [the teacher, peer editors]

Sample language focus:

- Identify two grammar or stylistic points you would like to improve as you write essays for this course.

Sample questions for reflection on writing:

- Besides correcting mistakes, how were you able to make the essay readable and easy to follow the second time around?
- Did you learn anything about your own writing process that can apply to future writing for this and other courses?

Grading Criteria

It is tempting to think of writing in terms of “form” (structure and grammatical accuracy) and “content” (everything else). However, form and content are deeply linked: grammatical errors and failure to find *le mot juste* may obscure, modify, or transform meaning, just as the desire to express meaning through a given tone determines linguistic and discursive choices. While the separation of form and content grades delivers a clear message about a student’s need to work on language accuracy, it also conveys a false sense of security about the readability. A student who earns a C in form and an A in content has learned that mediocre writing has had no effect whatsoever on the comprehensibility of the writing. The student who, less commonly, earns an A in form and a C in content has trouble seeing why a grammatically accurate paper is not enough.

A holistic, descriptive grading scale can reinforce the symbiotic nature of form and meaning and reaffirm the communicative goals of the assignment. Descriptive grading criteria may also eliminate the problem of how to “count” each draft that has led to the final product. Grading each draft separately can produce inflated final grades if teachers are reluctant to give anything below a C on the first draft. Conversely, earning very low grades on first drafts hardly motivates students to revise and rewrite. Yet if students think first drafts do not figure in the final grade, they are tempted to write quickly and carelessly, saving the “real” work for draft two.

By wording descriptive grade guides to encompass performance on *all* drafts, teachers not only underscore the importance of attentive writing in all stages, but also emphasize that each step of what appears to be a linear process actually contributes to an overlapping whole. See appendix C for a sample of descriptive grading criteria.

Conclusion

When the separate components of writing assignments reflect and reinforce one another, they promote nonlinear approaches to writing through their very example: the assignment itself demonstrates a reflective, overlapping, nonlinear approach. Implicit and explicit prompts to practice the habits of effective writers provide students the knowledge and strategies they need to improve their writing. Eventually students will have to compose in French and in their native language without such a thorough support system. With confidence built through guided practice, these independent writers will have internalized some successful habits, and they will know exactly whose process it is.

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Appendix A

Assigning Writing Topics: A Checklist for Teachers

The description of the assignment should reflect all of the elements you will consider when grading the composition. Use this checklist each time you assign a topic, set up editing exercises, and grade a writing assignment.

Selecting a Topic

The composition topic fits naturally with the content (theme, cultural focus, reading, film, vocabulary) and functional grammar (describing events that happened in the past, giving advice, persuading, requesting information) recently stressed in the course.

Instead of starting from scratch, use writing assignments in the textbook/workbook for inspiration, revising and refining according to your taste.

Is the topic interesting to you? Do you think it will motivate students to write?

To deflect attention from the writer to the reader, try to build in one degree of critical distance from the students' personal experience when composing assignments (Krueger 2001, p. 21).

Wording of the Assignment

When wording the assignment itself, check to see that it accomplishes the following:

Clearly identifies the **implied reader** and clearly states the **communicative focus** (Is it a modern version of a fairly tale directed toward children? An ironic rewriting of a fairly tale directed toward young adult readers?)

Clearly reinforces **functional purpose** (describing, narrating, persuading, supporting an opinion, informing, requesting information, giving advice, and so on)

Clearly states **structural focus**. If students are to write a letter, remind them to use salutation, closings, and so on. If they are writing a dialogue, should they identify speakers at the beginning? If they are writing a persuasive essay, should they have an introduction and conclusion?

Clearly states any **linguistic focus**: pertinent vocabulary lists, grammar structures, past assignments

Clearly states **editorial requirements**: due dates for all drafts, spacing, word or page count, minimal spelling and accuracy expectations for each draft, and so on

Clearly states or refers students to posted **grading criteria**