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## REFLECTING ON YOUR OWN EXPERIENCE STUDYING WRITING

I wish I would be telling the truth if I said that nobody ever said writing would be easy. But I can hear Ms. Novak as clear as day: "All you have to do is follow your outline. It's easy." I even remember hearing her chipper voice in my dreams years later while I was struggling with my dissertation: "Just write one paragraph for each roman numeral from your outline. That's all you have to do." And it wasn't only Ms. Novak in English composition. Mrs. Black and Mr. Ferguson promised me that my outlines would guide me handily through essay writing in their social studies and Shakespeare classes. Even Madame Bernier—who was otherwise totally genuine in her acknowledgment that students learn languages in various ways, an uncommon notion in a school dedicated to audio-lingual language pedagogy—even she looked at me once when I came to her for help on a French essay and said, "Well, did you write an outline? That would make it easy."



That was the late sixties, and I figured there was a conspiracy in the teachers' room of my high school. Why else would all of them have been saying the same thing over and over? Along with all the other suspicions of that era, I just explained away Outlining Makes Writing Easy as a machination to keep anarchy out of our school and out of our impressionable minds. That was in my stronger moments. The rest of the time I assumed there was something wrong with me, that I couldn't write. Okay, I've got this outline, but how do I get one little phrase to turn into a whole paragraph? Once I force a paragraph out, the next point in my outline no longer seems to be the next logical step. So if I just give in and write my essay and then rewrite my outline afterward, will the teacher notice? I don't have any idea whatsoever how I came up with outlines to begin with. How do I know what I'm going to write before I try to write it? Why don't we ever talk about things that we might end up writing about? How am I supposed to come up with ideas for an outline out of thin air? There's no question it was high time for the pedagogical revolution to process.

*If you're curious about the pendulum swing from product-oriented to process-oriented teaching within the field of teaching writing to native speakers of English, see Hairston's (1982) article, "The winds of change: Thomas Kuhn and the revolution in the teaching of writing."*





But there were still a few years of product-oriented composition teaching to come. I remember being freed from outlining in college composition while studying with my laid-back progressive English professor, Mr. Armstead. Instead of diagramming sentences and repeating that the capital letters follow the roman numerals and the small letters follow the Arabic numerals, he sat on the edge of his desk at the front of the room and talked about the war, Kent State, and campesinos. We felt the rhythm of King's "I Have a Dream" speech and were moved by the power of language and its effect on individuals and society. Mr. Armstead got us to talk enough about the sociopolitical issues that we read about in our freshman anthology that I began having a sense that there were important things for me to write about and that I had interesting ideas about those things. But that feeling was fleeting. Every Friday Mr. Armstead gave us an essay topic, something that grew out of our week's readings and discussions, and told us it was due the following Friday. Not having a clue as to how to get going on a paper (except knowing that outlines didn't work well for me), I procrastinated the whole week, sweating about how I would get the paper done, feeling guilty that I wasn't doing anything about it. I'd inevitably crank out something Thursday night just in time for the Friday deadline. Meanwhile I remained very much involved in the course, inspired by the new readings and discussions that did not relate much—or so I thought—to what I was supposed to be writing about but that would serve as a basis for the next week's essay. I never turned in anything other than first drafts in college composition. Those first drafts were graded and returned the following Monday, and I never knew why I got the grades I did.

I finally learned ways to write academic papers in graduate school. Maybe I finally learned how to read and make connections among ideas from one source to another at that time since I was focusing on a unified course of study. A broad liberal arts education may have its merits, but I never read much of anything in depth as an undergraduate except German literature, given my major in that language. It was in graduate school that I began to see links between what I was studying in various courses, and I began to draw on my growing understanding of a field of knowledge to understand new readings and discussions. I also found that in reading and listening to discussions, I was able to learn new ideas as well as analyze how an argument was developed. I may well have developed the ability to analyze the structure of arguments during my undergraduate study of German literature. But what was new for me in graduate school was that I took my understanding of a framework of an argument and deposited that framework somewhere in my mind for later use as a rhetorical strategy for my own writing.

Besides analyzing the rhetorical structure of academic arguments and keeping that structure mentally shelved for later use in my writing, I attempted many other writing strategies throughout graduate school. I was always trying to make academic writing easier for myself, and the type of strategy I experimented with most often involved ways to get going on my writing early to avoid my undergraduate pattern of procrastination. I remember talking to professors early in a session about plans for term papers, then rushing home to try to capture the ideas on paper, sometimes simply in the form of random notes and sometimes as drafts of introductions for the actual paper. Next I'd gather more

library information or perhaps some data, usually then letting the library sources and data sit on my desk and my ideas swim in my head for weeks. I'd end up throwing the paper together at close to the last minute. For each paper assigned I'd vow to work more steadily and efficiently the next time around.

The single strategy that I found most successful for managing the workload of writing was working in cooperation with fellow classmates. Setting a schedule with each other for regular meetings, bouncing ideas back and forth, trying things out in writing, collecting data, alternating trips to the library for more sources, writing and rewriting—it all worked out easier in collaboration with friends than when I suffered it on my own. Working with others I became far more aware of the process one needed to go through to produce good written work because we kept talking about the process in determining plans with each other from meeting to meeting. As I reflect on that period in my academic life I am pleased that I learned that I write best in collaboration with others, but I am disappointed that I was allowed very few opportunities to write collaboratively for required school assignments. Most of this work was done for conference presentations, publications, and curriculum development for teaching assistantships rather than for course term papers.

I've seen from examining my own history as a writing student that my early schooling, even into college, involved what we now refer to as product-oriented writing pedagogy. The focus of the teacher's and the students' attention was the final written product, the essay. There was little discussion or experimentation with various strategies for producing those final written products, except, of course, for the use of the outline, a static product in itself. As it turns out, I was most satisfied with my writing and I learned most when I ignored the constraining outline, despite what my teachers called for.

In my memories of high school English and freshman composition, I was not encouraged to draft and redraft, to evaluate my own writing, or even to determine my own reason or purpose for pitching a paper in a certain direction. I was only writing for the teacher, never to accomplish something in my own learning agenda. I wish my teachers had challenged me with more reasons to write, helping me determine what I wanted papers to accomplish. Rather than simplify things ("The only thing you have to do is. . .") I wish my teachers had pushed me to peek at the complexity of the range of directions and attitudes I could take in my writing, let alone the universe of ideas I could incorporate in my writing, and then I wish they had guided me in strategies for putting those attitudes and ideas into print. This is what takes place in the classroom given process-oriented writing pedagogy. The teacher works with students, sometimes individually, helping them try out alternatives, responding to them as autonomous writers, helping them experiment with various strategies to see what might work well given a variety of writing tasks, guiding them through multiple drafts until the students realize they have produced their best written work. Students also collaborate with each other, acting as resources, sounding boards, critics, and coauthors. Writing is not easy. The best writing teacher helps students realize many ways to confront the difficulties of writing, move past the difficulties, and understand what has been accomplished.

That's where I came from as a writer. My past shapes my present; my younger student-self informs my teaching-self. In upcoming chapters you will see more

of my teaching-self, as well as those of my colleagues in middle school through university levels. My colleagues' and my own students, including those from my dissertation research, also appear in these pages. As part of any teacher's continuing professional development, it is important to critically reflect on one's own learning past in order to glean the best and adapt or diverge from the rest in controlled and justified ways. Think about it. What was your experience as a writing student?



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*It is important for all teachers to examine the sources of their pedagogical beliefs. We all approach our classrooms and students with ideas from our understanding of principles and methods of teaching, curriculum design, the structural and discourse patterns of English text, language learning and use, and other important areas in our professional field. We are also influenced in our teaching by our own classroom experiences as students. Take time now to collect memories of your experiences as a student in writing classes. In a later chapter you will be asked to reexamine the memories you document now in order to get a fuller view of your attitudes toward writing and teaching writing. Before reading further in this book, answer in as much detail as possible each of the following questions.*

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**1** *What was your earliest classroom experience with learning how to write? How old were you? What were your school and class like? What were your fellow students and the teacher like? What do you remember most about what your teacher taught? What do you remember learning? How do you remember reacting to what happened during the classroom teaching and your learning?*

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**2** *What later significant school experiences with learning about writing or composition do you remember? Again, what do you remember most clearly about what your teacher taught you? How do you remember reacting to the instruction? What do you remember learning about writing or composing? What do you remember learning about yourself as a writer? Describe as many critical school experiences as you can.*

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**3** *How do you remember your teachers responding to your writing? How did they give you feedback? What did they say to you? What did they write on your papers? What areas of your writing did they focus on in their comments? How do you remember feeling when you got their feedback? How did you respond to grades on your writing? How did teacher response and grades affect you as a writer in school?*

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**4** *As a student, which types of school writing assignments did you find easiest*

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to do? Which types of school writing assignments did you find most difficult? Why do you think these were easy or difficult? What is it about the types of writing assignments that might have made them easy or difficult for you? What is it about you as a writer that might have caused some assignments to be easy and others difficult?

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**5** How would you describe yourself generally as a student reader? Did you avoid reading assignments? Did you do some but not all assigned reading? Did you conscientiously accomplish all reading assignments? Did you do all assigned reading and even more on your own? How do you believe your reading habits as a student may have affected your writing?

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**6** How much writing do you remember doing alone as a student and how much in collaboration with fellow students? Do you remember which you preferred? Why?

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**7** Do you remember your writing in school ever being compiled in a “Best of . . .” volume or published in some way with other student writing? What were the circumstances? How did this experience affect you as a writer?

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**8** As an adult, what writing have you done that you really enjoy? Why do you enjoy it? What is it about the type of writing task or about you as a writer that made the experience pleasing to you? What strategies can you think of that you regularly draw on to do this enjoyable writing?

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**9** As an adult, what experiences have you had that pushed you to write something new? How do you go about tackling a new writing task? What strategies have you used to write something new? How did you feel about the task and yourself as a writer?

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**10** How would you describe your current adult self as a reader? What do you like reading most? What do you regularly read? How much time do you read weekly or daily? When you read various types of material, what do you focus on? (main points only? all of the ideas? only the interesting ideas? the author’s use of language?) How do you think your current reading habits might affect you as a writer?

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**11** How much reading and writing do you do at a computer terminal? What are your experiences communicating by e-mail and getting information from the Internet? Do you notice yourself reading or writing differently or for different purposes, given the electronic technology, than when you read or write using paper?

## ***Other Investigations***

For a multimedia adventure, see Karen Johnson and Glenn Johnson's *Teachers Understanding Teaching* (1997), the multimedia hypertext CD-ROM component in the TeacherSource series. Johnson and Johnson's first five tasks suggest ways for you to reflect on your own learning background as a means of informing yourself as a teacher.

## ***Suggested Readings***

If you yearn for an optimistic view of U.S. public education, read Mike Rose's *Lives on the Boundary: The Struggles and Achievements of America's Underprepared* (1989). He begins with the story of his own life and schooling in the U.S. as the son of Italian immigrants and refocusses on the lives of all of our students.

For the voice of a Chinese teacher of English reflecting on her own educational background, see Danling Fu's *"My Trouble is my English": Asian Students and the American Dream* (1995). Besides her own story, Danling Fu tells the stories of three young refugees from Laos as they experience high school in the U.S.