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Professional Book Review

Writing To Be Read: A Book To Build With

Edward Darling

In 1968, the Hayden Book Company published Ken Macrorie's *Writing To Be Read*, one of the most important books ever written in the United States about the teaching of writing. In its fourth decade and third edition, it is now published by Boynton/Cook/Heinemann. Macrorie was, and is, a leader in reforming the teaching of writing, and *Writing To Be Read* contains some of his most important discoveries and innovations.

As its title implies, this is a book whose purpose is to show writers, especially high school writers, how to write engaging pieces that are good enough and relevant enough to be valued by classmates, teachers, family members, and other readers beyond the classroom. Macrorie talks about public and private writing (44, 145), and he does not exclude private writing and its many purposes from any writer's work, but in this book he promotes the production of good writing for a wide audience.

Writing To Be Read may be of special interest to teachers in Michigan because Macrorie wrote it in the mid- 1960s while he was teaching at Western Michigan University. At the time, he was working with high school teachers from around the state, and it was these teachers who contributed the pieces of student writing which became such an important feature of the book. [1]

I assume it was the goal of producing well-written pieces for a wide audience that led Macrorie to not include in his book traditional-school-expository-analytical writing whose audience is limited mainly to teachers. He includes ways to write book reviews, columns of opinion, reports, case studies, interviews, and pieces about issues, but the ways he presents these kinds of writing are different from the ways they are often taught: although they may be analytical, Macrorie shows how to write them from a personal point of view. Like other reformers, Macrorie broadened high school writing to include more of what James Moffett called "the universe of discourse," writing that includes more of the actual types professionals use. Macrorie points out that "[a]ll good writing-no matter what its type or form-has much in common with all other good writing" (273); what students learn by writing dialogues, stories, and fabulous realities, as well as the forms listed above, should help them write any kind of piece. I have discovered that the forms Macrorie recommends capitalize on what students know, so they have ample information to work with.

What makes *Writing To Be Read* special, though, is not only the forms Macrorie discusses, but the way he shows how to write pieces of quality others will want to read. My interpretation of Macrorie's approach is that there are four essentials: writers must tell the truth about what matters to them, know how to write freely, know how to get and use readers' responses to their drafts, and know how to edit. As far as I know, Macrorie's emphasis on telling the truth is unique among books about writing intended for high school students.

These essentials can lead to remarkable results. They not only produce good writing, they also make it possible for writers to feel confident about writing, and that may be this book's greatest gift to young writers. Throughout the book, Macrorie conveys his own confidence that teenagers can produce good writing, and given all the examples by the Michigan students, he has a right to be confident.

I am embarrassed to say that before I began using *Writing To Be Read*, I never gave much thought to truth in student writing. Perhaps this was because I expected truth from professional writers' works about great affairs and universal themes, but since my students weren't professionals, I thought their writing didn't need to meet the standard of truth. Perhaps it was because of the assignments I gave. Many times I asked my students to write about material I already knew, and they knew I knew what the truth was, so I didn't need to say, "Tell the truth." Another reason was because I was the only audience for my students' work; the truth became more of a concern when my students and I started to publish class magazines for readers outside the class. On this point Macrorie says, "As writers, the wider our readership, the more we feel pressure and desire to tell truths that count" (273).

Whatever the reason, I did not associate truth with student writing, and I did not make it part of any assignment, except when I talked about plagiarism. But that was more to avoid a lie than

make truth-telling the bedrock of a piece. So one of the first things that caught my attention in *Writing To Be Read* was the way Macrorie emphasizes telling the truth, as he does in this statement early in the book:

> This is the first requirement for good writing: truth; not *the truth* (whoever knows surely what that is?), but some kind of truth-a connection between the things written about, the words used in writing, and your real experience in the world you know well-whether in fact or dream or imagination. (14)

Macrorie writes about truth as something personal and individual: a writer needs to tell his or her own truth. With his inclusion of "dream" and "imagination" I assume he is talking not only about truth in nonfiction, but also in fiction—I once heard someone say that fiction tells the truth with a capital "T."

Since I began teaching with *Writing To Be Read* I have been asking why this seemingly obvious and simple advice, to tell the truth, should have such a great effect on writing. I believe that when I ask students to tell the truth about something that matters, they take their writing seriously. I think most persons associate the truth with what is significant, and associating writing with truth can make writing significant. Students see most profoundly the positive effects of telling the truth when they hear each other's writing and when they see their classmates' reactions to their truthful pieces.

A quotation from a piece by Jennifer O'Brien, a high school junior, about both of her grandfathers' dying from cancer, shows how she made the connection between writing and the truth. In the year since she wrote this piece, she has shared it with several audiences, and she and her family have given me permission to quote from it here. She wrote a column of opinion against smoking and began by writing about her feelings about cancer:

> "Cancer" can be a very awful word. When that word whispers across my ears it's like a poison slowly seeping into my soul. First my ears cringe at the sound of it, then this poison slowly starts wrenching my heart. It quickens my breath and leaves me with an empty, cold, hollow feeling in my stomach. Cancer indeed is a terrible thing and I know first-hand what it can do to people.

I remember my reaction when I first heard this opening. It quickened my breath, too. I had never heard such a strong statement from Jennifer, and I wasn't expecting anything so intensely personal in a column of opinion. At one point she tells about Christmases spent with one of her grandfathers, and his illness:

> I. . . remember my grandfather sitting back in his chair at the head of the table smoking his pipe, filling the air with a sweet smell, all the while laughing and smiling. Now it's different. My grandfather is no longer there. . . . His chair remains empty and the air is no longer filled with the sweet smoke of a pipe. He died of lung cancer and emphysema two years ago. Emphysema is a disease that destroys tissue in the lungs. You can barely breathe because your air sacs are smaller from the tar in the cigarettes or pipe that you smoke. You can no longer take deep breaths, and every breath you take is a wheeze. It started with his coughing up blood. Then, after many trips to the doctor, he was diagnosed with lung cancer. He wasn't that bad off for a while, but as he got worse, he could no longer leave the house. He had to be on a respirator all of the time. When we would go over to see him, we used to have to leave the room so he could get his "treatments," which consisted of a respirator and then a lot of pounding on his back to get the phlegm up from his lungs.

This was part of her opinion against smoking, based on first-hand knowledge and on telling the truth about something that mattered. As she shared her paper with her classmates, I saw that it mattered to them, too, and that this was an important piece, as important as anything else they had read about the dangers of smoking. It was more than just a paper to fulfill an assignment.

Jennifer was the only member of the class who knew the truth about seeing her grandfather die, and this shows something else about writing the truth: when a writer knows more than anyone else about a topic, readers—including the teacher-are dependent on the writer for the truth. The writer's special knowledge confers a special responsibility.

But the truth can be dangerous. In their need to be truthful about subjects that matter, students write about experiences I would rather not know—rape, abuse, divorce, sex, sexual orientation, crime, drugs, addiction, the police, disease, suicide, death. I have found it necessary to tell my students that in accordance with the law and my conscience I may need to tell a guidance counselor about certain pieces. Macrorie does not say students should be expected or required to write on such topics, but many teenagers feel compelled to write about them, especially when they're given an invitation to tell the truth about something that matters. In many parts of the United States students are not free to write about controversial or sensitive topics in school, but where they still may, an English teacher

is often the first reader to receive and respond to deeply personal papers. And who's to say that such a piece may not be the most important a teenager has ever written?

But the truth isn't always serious. One of my favorite stories from *Writing To Be Read* is entitled "Kiss":

> I first kissed a girl in the fifth grade, during basketball season. I decided it had to be this cold November night. With the north wind blowing, it had to be done in a car or on the south side of the gym. ... We held hands until half time, and that was when I decided it would have to be now. We went out to my parents' car with my best friend and his girl friend. Rita and I just stared straight ahead. I was shaking so badly with fear that I couldn't get any words out. She broke the silence finally by saying, "We better go in or our parents will be looking for us." So I made a deal with her. We could go in as soon as we went on the other side of the gym. The first thing I remember her saying was, "Well, we are on the other side of the gym." I tried to kiss her but missed. So I led her over to a foot-high rock. I climbed up so I could reach her, and finally kissed her for a second, but then it felt like a long time. (66)

Along with telling the truth, Macrorie emphasizes the value of writing freely, where the crucial requirement is writing fast. In free writing, telling the truth is important, too, as in any kind of writing, but writing fast is the key. Free writing is a way of getting started on something, of avoiding self-censorship, of taking away pressure when it can be counterproductive, and a way to find a strong voice. Macrorie includes several free writes in his book that are examples of good writing.

I've found that students are very interested in reading others' free writes in class and talking about them, but free writing can be difficult for some students because it is antithetical to much that they have learned: in free writing a writer suspends concerns about correctness and does not plan. I can't say that all of my students like free writing, but most of them have discovered ways it can work for them, mainly by getting them started on something, as Meredith Cowie, a junior, shows in an end-of-the-course comment:

> Oftentimes, before I took this class, I would ask other people, "What should I write about? I need a topic to write a paper on." Now, I sit down, do a free write, which is another important tool I learned about in Advanced Comp. And I find a topic that matters to me.

Macrorie presents a useful way to look at free writing by dividing it into two categories: unfocused and focused. In the first, a writer writes with no sense of direction, at least at the outset. In the second, a writer focuses on a topic from the start, and this may seem more feasible than writing with no direction. The ability to write freely improves with practice, and at any stage in the writing of a piece free writing can help a writer discover new insights for troublesome parts.

As a kind of balance to free writing, throughout *Writing To Be Read* Macrorie includes chapters on editing, where he shows writers how to pay close attention to detail. Three of these chapters have been especially helpful to my students and me—"Tightening," "Repeating," and "Sharpening." Macrorie's range in editing is broad, and he discusses ways to find unnecessary words, begin and end pieces, distinguish between weak and strong repetition, use rhythm and sound, mix formal and informal language, build parallel constructions, and let words "speak to each other" (81). These parts of the book constitute an editor's handbook. Using its recommendations, students can learn quickly how to strengthen a writing voice by taking out what's not necessary while leaving intact what's important.

I call some of Macrorie's admonitions for editing, which are often humorous or mockserious, "Macrorieisms":

> The words *which, who,* and *that* often clutter up sentences. Good writers remove Whooery, Whichery, or Thatery. (36)

> It-ache and There-ache are dullnesses marked by unnecessary uses of *it* and *there.* They are often associated with Is-ness. (113)

Macrorie makes fundamental principles of editing accessible by presenting them with easily-understood examples and a minimum of grammatical terms.

Editing is also another way of getting at the truth, as Macrorie points out in Chapter 5, "Deceiving Oneself," where he shows how writers can "gild the pill" (41) and mislead themselves as well as their readers, often unconsciously. He shows how it's not enough to be concerned with factual truth only, as important as that is. He goes to a deeper level and shows how even single words can convey or not convey the truth, not only of fact, but of feeling and of one's voice. In a conference on a draft of this paper, my colleague Walt Garner pointed out:

> When I go back and read what I've written, my words can seem awkward. I see that what I've got is not what I meant, and I have to ask myself, "What do I really mean?" I get closer to the truth as I reexamine and rework.

For most of my writing and teaching life I have thought of editing as a way of cleaning a piece up and making it economical. But to think of it as a way of getting closer to the truth makes it a more compelling skill to learn.

The fourth essential, responding to and getting responses to pieces in progress, is a need Macrorie addresses on the first page of the Preface:

> Fundamental in the making of writers is not a knowledge of this or that grammatical point, a strategy of style, or a strong desire to write, but fully carrying out the act of writing to be read by real persons who respond.

Macrorie deals with responding in two ways. First, throughout *Writing To Be Read* he shows writers and conference partners ways to read and comment on writing through his analyses of student pieces. He is particularly good at setting an example for finding strengths.

Then in the chapter entitled "The Helping Circle," he gives advice about responding. He is concerned that pieces, in any stage of development, be read aloud and well, and he recommends that someone other than the writer read a piece so the writer can hear another voice and observe the reactions of listeners, especially involuntary responses—smiles, "ah's," and so forth—which show readers' reactions (3-8, 85, 92, 268-9). Another benefit I have seen is that many writers who would not have shared their pieces if they'd had to read them, have shared them when someone else read them.

Macrorie recommends encouragement and praise for pieces until the members of a class establish a good working relationship; then responders may begin asking questions and talking about weaknesses and needs as they see them (85, 90, 91, 270).

It's usually in conferences and helping circles that my students begin to see new possibilities for pieces and start to think about revision and editing, as Meredith Cowie, a student writer, points out in an end-of-the-course comment:

> Advanced Comp. taught me that. . . pieces can take different shapes] because of the audience the writer is presenting to, new information they [writers] receive, or if the writer changes his/her opinion. I had this experience with my piece about homework during vacations [a piece that made a statement against this practice]. The piece took many different forms over time because of all of the reasons I mentioned above.

Meredith brought three versions of this piece to class helping circles, and after each session she wrote an improved draft.

In my first two years of using *Writing To Be Read*, I felt hesitant about my ability to keep students on track in sharing sessions, and I didn't include sharing as often as I do now—three times a week. It took a while for me to realize that teaching how to talk about writing is part of teaching writing, and I have found that as long as the pieces being shared are interesting to the students, paying attention is not a problem.

Interest is an asset not to be underrated. It can become the foundation on which to lay the teaching and learning of the skills, approaches, and attitudes writing requires. And interest can insure that these skills and approaches will not become drudgery but vehicles of growth that build success and confidence. After thirty-plus years, *Writing To Be Read* is still showing where interest lies in writing, both in its products and its production.

Notes

[1] In the Acknowledgment in the first of edition of *Writing To Be Read*, Macrorie lists the Michigan teachers with whom he was working as the book took shape:

> Among Michigan teachers who sent me writing by their students were Will Brenner, East Grand Rapids High School and Grand Rapids Junior College; Barbara Davis, Charlotte High School; Jean Morell, Portage Central High School; Agnes Haynes, Wayne Memorial High School; Dennis H. Mulder, Grand Rapids Central Christian High School; Bonnie Burd, Northwestern High School, Detroit; Martha Hulings, Ravenna Public Schools; Ruth Hildebrand,Lakeview High School; Katherine Limpus, Portage Northern High School; and Robert Heaton, Reeths-Puffer High School, Muskegon. Sister Mary Lois Glonek of Greater Muskegon Catholic Central High School. . . supplied several of the statements about writing by writers. My special thanks to John Bennett, for furnishing hundreds of examples of lively writing by his students at Central High School, Kalamazoo (vii).

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