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Professional Concerns: Reading Comprehension and Essay Writing

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of material which often contains archaic vocabulary and expressions. Teaching through reading skills alleviated the frustration involved when trying to deal with such material. It wasn't long before my whole program took on a more satisfying look.

Although reading skills for the content area seemed to be the appropriate vehicle for the comprehension of inquiry, I was still dissatisfied with evaluation procedures. I feel that the best evaluation of what a student has learned is by reading his thoughts as set down on paper. Essay-questions are best to measure such things as perception, analytical ability, organizational skills, and communication effectiveness when drawing inferences based on evidence. However, students generally have great difficulty in writing down answers to questions, and I usually avoided this type of test.

One of the things I found particularly useful for teaching comprehension of textbook material involves the recognition of "reading patterns."¹ Most professional writers for textbooks follow certain organizational patterns when they write. The student learns to recognize these reading patterns through clue words and will be alert for the specific purpose of the material being read. For example, if the student is reading about the Cowboy Era and he sees clue words such as "reasons," "effects" or "consequence," he knows a cause-effect pattern is being used and he should look for specific happenings and their results. While I was analyzing these ideas, I realized that students could be taught these organizational patterns not only for reading purposes but for writing as well.

I began to work out procedures for teaching how to write answers to essay-tests. I collected typical essay-questions for analysis of the vocabulary commonly used in such questions. I became satisfied that most questions give some clue as to the structure of the answer. It also appeared that the reading patterns would apply as writing patterns for all questions. I taught my students the use of the Umbrella Form as a focal point for structuring their writing.² The Umbrella Form is a drawing plus a few simple rules. The canopy part represents the topic sentence. The shaft represents three sentences that give details or proofs, and the handle represents the concluding sentence. Utilization of these rules helped my students to avoid the sin of brevity. An example which illustrates the complete process follows:

History essay-question: "Why did the era of open-range cattle raising come to an end in the latter part of the 1880's?"

Analysis: The word "why" is a cause-effect clue word. It implies "because . . ."

"The word "why" is a request that the student supply reasons or causes.

The phrase ". . . era of open-range cattle raising come to an end . . ." indicates the result or effect of the causes.

Pattern to be used: Cause-effect. The student will use the Umbrella Form with the result as the topic sentence:

Essay-Answer:

Topic Sentence
(Question restated)

Three Sentences
(Causes)

Conclusion

The era of open-range ranching ended in the latter part of the 1880's for several reasons. First of all, the area of the Great Plains had become over-stocked and there wasn't enough grass to feed the cattle. Ranchers found that disease spread easily on the plains from animal to animal and they couldn't care for their cattle properly. Finally, breeding to improve the cattle was impossible with open-range conditions. The day of the range-riding cowboy, romantic and adventurous, was over.

The answer to the right of the Umbrella Form contains five sentences which include three causes of the end of open-range cattle raising. Naturally, the student can give more reasons if he wishes, but the answer is complete as given.

Any student benefits from the acquisition of skills that bring order to the knowledge that he wishes to express. My students have benefited from the combination of reading and writing skills. They have learned considerable history and have sharpened their ability to do critical thinking.

Works Cited

¹Harold Herber. *Teaching Reading in the Content Area*. Englewood Cliffs, New Jersey: Prentice-Hall, Inc., 1970, pp. 104-106.

²Dorothy Rich. *WRITING: Success for Children Begins at Home*. Washington, D.C.: Home and School Institute, 1972, pp. 6-9.