

# FLOW

Foreign  
Language  
Opportunities  
*in* Writing

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## **THE JOY OF WRITING – TEACH, PRACTICE, INSPIRE!**

### **Abstract**

Writing is one of the most effective forms of recording thoughts and communicating across time and space. It is also the major focus of early years education when children strive to make the connection between sounds and their graphic representations. Yet, writing is not merely translating utterances into texts but an art of putting one's thoughts and feeling on paper is such a way that they will be understood and experienced by the reader. This is obviously difficult, the more so if it is done in another language. Teaching writing requires many skills, most of which have little to do with the actual process itself. As teachers, we need to guide students through the intricacies of logical argumentation, text structure and formal aspects or writing inspiring them to come up with fresh ideas along the way. This text is a summary of a workshop on teaching writing to secondary school students which was aimed at providing new ideas on how to encourage students to write and, more importantly, how not to discourage them from the process. We strongly believe that writing is a creative process of self expression and is, as such, an immensely fulfilling activity. The only thing teachers have to do is help their students experience the joy of writing.

### **1. Introduction**

At the end of each unit of nearly every course book there looms a dreadful section devoted to writing. Nobody likes it. The students – because it means producing full sentences more or less logically connected with each other in English and teachers – because it means long hours of reading and correcting them. If you are lucky the essays, reviews or letters will not be copied from the Internet but they will still lack creativity and originality. A Tunisian novelist, Habib Selmi, said that “writing is a journey using language from within to travel to one's deepest and farthest feelings, impressions, visions, ideas, apprehensions and dreams.”

This short paper, which serves as a summary of a workshop delivered to secondary school and academic teachers, attempts to address basic questions that secondary school teachers have to answer in their everyday job, questions about the point of teaching writing, the stages on the way and the nature of the final product, offering inspiration to all those who wish to engage the students in the fascinating process of writing. At the workshop we looked at tasks which help our students express themselves through writing rather than merely fulfill the formal requirements of school leaving exam. Why do we teach writing? Unfortunately, the most common answer is to prepare the students to the exam. Motivation is instrumental and, thus the task is rarely a compelling one. We looked at ways in which the teacher can make students realize the importance of learning how to write well and grow to like it. How do we start? As a rule students are given certain guidelines as to how they should structure their texts with a box of useful phrases to use and an example to model on. This is usually done during the last 10 minutes of a lesson and the task is assigned as homework, because in class writing is considered a waste of time. We looked at writing as an inherent element of a unit, a final product summarizing a whole topic covered through other skills. We saw in class writing as a valuable experience that contributes not only to developing the understanding of text structure, but also to a general comprehension of what has been learned so far in a given unit. What do we do next? What happens to the texts once they've been written, checked, assessed and given back to the students? Usually they end up in the bin. There is little, if any, reflection upon the texts and thus the whole process is less efficient. We looked at different ways of dealing with post assessment feedback to make it beneficial for the future work of the students. What do we want to achieve? It is true that high school students need to know how to write in order to pass the school leaving exam and this is their main (if not sole) aim. What we need to make them realize is that writing is fun. It is the means of expressing themselves, their emotions, feelings, attitudes and ideas. It gives them the opportunity to play with the language, to find their unique styles of expression, perhaps even better developed than in their first language. If we encourage them to take it seriously enough, it may allow them to reinvent themselves as writers, to create new identities that they will be willing to take on and, most importantly of all, they will ENJOY the process and enrich their language on the way.

## 2. How not to teach

Anyone can write. At least anyone who can use any writing tool and knows the letters of some language that has a written variety. Anyone who understands that letters make words, words make sentences, which form texts. In some ways writing is like playing chess: many people say they can play the game while the only thing they really know is how the pieces move. This game of the kings requires, however, much more than the simple mechanics of movements. It is a war, in which the strategy is just as important as the ability to foresee the opponent's plans of attack and plan defense, at the same time plotting against the ruler of the opposite kingdom. All these intricacies are alien to those who focus on chess as a game of moving various pieces on the board in order to block one of them. Just like a game of chess is not a sequence of random movements, writing is not merely a process of committing words to paper. It is an art of shaping thoughts into worlds of images perceivable by sensitive readers. Writing is a process of creating intricately patterned lacework of meanings, emotions and perceptions; a mysterious encounter with the hidden self of the author. Done properly, it is a liberating, purifying experience that enriches and fulfills the writer. Why is this wonderful feeling not shared by the majority of students required to produce masses of texts for one reason or another during their years of formal education? What is missing in the attitude towards teaching writing that stops them from becoming truly creative masers?

Unfortunately, in the majority of educational contexts, instead of teaching how to write we mentor our students in how to type (or handwrite) different versions of a two-hundred-word-long combination of nouns, verbs and linking words, whatever can fill the page. Our students rarely like writing tasks, which they treat as necessary evil and teachers are often at fault. It seems that there are three simultaneously occurring components necessary to achieve failure in teaching to write. *No explanation. No motivation. No feedback.* If students are given a topic and asked to write a 250-word essay without any warm-up, and by that we mean any kind of explanation, it is almost certain that, with the exception of a few self-motivated aspiring writers, they will see this as an ambush from their teacher.

If young people get a sense that you are the only recipient of their work, and a very tired or frustrated at that, they will not feel that entertaining you or sharing their privacy with you is worthwhile. Writing will become a mathematical equation and counting words will matter more than sharing thoughts on the subject.

If their first attempt is graded but no feedback given, your students will not feel that they have gained anything from the process, hence they will look forward to the end of the class and recycle their papers.

### **3. Struggling with reality**

Literacy education starts very early on when children learn the shape of letters and meticulously rewrite the symbols over and over again in their notebooks. Literature is present in our lives nearly from birth. Children listen to fantastic stories and react lively to the adventures which they create in their imagination from what they hear. Later, they create their own worlds of imagination based on their literary experiences. However, when children finally get to the stage of writing longer texts, the charm is gone. Suddenly, the formal constraints and rules of building coherent texts overwhelms the original creativity and imagination. The inventive in its very nature process, becomes mechanical and meaningless to the authors. Form overtakes content and attention shifts from creating an imaginative story to proper spelling, punctuation, register and structure. The soul and spirit of the author, together with all the immensely important things he or she could have communicated to the world between the lines, are lost. By the time students get to the end of high school they develop genuine hatred for all sorts of writing assignments. The form of school leaving English exam in Poland requires the students to be able to write a number of text types ranging from postcards and notes to argumentative essays and articles, depending on the level the exam is taken on. Thus, the main concern of high school teachers is to prepare their students to meet the exam requirements as best as they can. Not surprisingly, students' motivation tends to be purely instrumental. They learn certain fixed phrases, or even whole sentences, by heart in order to comply with the formal expectations of the test. The question what they are going to write about is of secondary importance. Consequently, all texts are nearly the same and, although they comply with the formal standards, they are stripped of all possible elements of genuine writing texts, like the ability to make a lasting impression on the reader, provoke the reader to think or an element of surprise. In other words, these texts are tailored in order to pass the exam rather than created for the joy of the reader. Is this what we as teacher wish for as the ultimate goal of teaching writing? There is no denying that with the action packed curriculum and stifling time constraints it is immensely difficult to devote enough time to writing. Many teachers are left with no other option but to assign writing tasks as homework without much preparation before and little

reflection after. To be fair, in the Polish system of education students are very rarely, if ever, instructed on how to create texts in their mother tongue.

#### 4. Focus on meaning

On the other hand, taking into consideration the popularity of blogs, it seems that young people have an internal need to share their thoughts with others. High school years coincide with the teenage rebellion which manifests itself in the need to air their views, to voice their opinions. If this energy is put into writing it creates excellent conditions for the emergence of real, highly engaged texts that would serve as a vent for students' emotions and reflection upon them. Helping your students realize that someone will actually read what they think on the matter may be a breakthrough, especially if they realize that, depending on their future goals, one day it may actually be a lot of people. If they are not encouraged to analyze why or for whom they are supposed to write, they will always approach it with a grudge. So while thinking about the style, the register and the tone seems inevitable, the essence of writing is the opinion on the subject. Macpherson states:

Anyone embarking on a piece of writing must be clear on a number of things. Obviously, that person must know who he is writing for; that is he must know his audience, and know what kind of language to use. Most importantly, there must be something worth saying. (2006: 13)

It seems to us that the key word in teaching writing is motivation. The problem, however, is not that the students lack intrinsic motivation, but rather that the teachers kill it by not letting the students develop their thoughts to the full. If they were allowed to initially ignore the limitations of form in order to find the real voice, their own unique style of expression and the real message they mean to convey, the texts would serve not only as good examples of students' true linguistic abilities but also as tools for self discovery and development. Later, students could work on the texts giving them more formalized shapes by gradually imposing the style constraints without losing the spirit and main thoughts.

We imagine that helping them understand that *what* they want to say is crucial to us is the key step to achieving progress. And with our assistance the form will find its way.

Obviously, such a process would inevitably mean more work for the teachers. Pietro Boscolo and Carmen Gelati claim that

... a child is often intrinsically motivated to write in early schooling, but unsuccessful writing experiences due to the increasing complexity of writing with school grade may transform his or her original will to write into extrinsic motivation, concerned with teacher evaluation rather than with the process of writing. (2006: 203)

Shifting focus from the end product of a writing task to the process of writing itself requires close cooperation between the students and the teacher at each stage of the text creation.

## 5. Talk, talk, talk

We all know that students dislike writing but do we really understand why? If, as a team, you analyze what is most terrifying about a blank page and then show students how to start and how to arrange their ideas logically, that will hopefully take the intimidation off. We believe that anticipating your students' apprehension will help you win them over.

Initiating a conversation about writing can be a turning point in young people's attitude towards this task. Try to create a context where a discussion about writing goes beyond talking about letters of complaint. Find out what forms of written expression your students enjoy or which they consider worthwhile. Students will very quickly realize that they often write but since it is grade-free it exists under a different code. Maybe they exchange emails with friends from Spain in English, some might consider studying abroad, some may plan to become journalists. It may be crucial for their perception of writing if you ask your students where they think they may use the skill, in what jobs and situations. Whatever the reason and occasion, it is vital for them to acknowledge that the ability to express themselves in a foreign language might prove important. The ability to do it fluently, coherently and efficiently might actually pay back one day. Your lesson might as well be the moment when it comes to their focus.

Let us face it – talking about writing, inspiring and encouraging is a must but it will not do the job on its own. We have to begin somewhere and brainstorm sounds like *the* place. If there are any ideas or opinions they will not be crystal clear at this stage but at least they will force the blank page to disappear. This exercise does not consume too much of a precious, could-have-been-better-used, probably grammar-devoted lesson time. It is creative, fun and apart from solving a puzzling issue of where to get ideas from, it also helps students realize that foreign words exist in their minds ready to be used. If students get into the

process they might even learn new words. Pair work would perfectly suit the aim of such an activity as students inevitably differ in their ideas and opinions and may get inspired by their peers. However, do not neglect an important part of actually letting them share their ideas with you or with the rest of the group. Make a habit of always checking and discussing their ideas. So a quick in-class brainstorm exercise before assigning a take-away topic will make students head home with their energy up, feeling that they have completed at least part of the process.

Writing is a more polished and a more structured way of thinking. It is just another way of selecting our arguments, ensuring we have an opinion. Maybe not all of our opinions will hit the news straight away but clarifying what we like and why we like it is important before we grab a pen. And by the way, we still practice English. If you give your students a broader perspective and show them that writing may be just another task where they voice their thoughts, then mundane topics may not haunt them at night.

## **6. Getting to work**

The next step is text analysis. It is difficult to write something from scratch but it is much easier to analyze somebody else's work and learn from their genius or mistakes and get inspired on the way. Showing students examples of writings in the practiced genre will give them the basis for comparison and reference for creating their own end product. Once the students realize what sounds interesting and what is less gripping, they will need more directions, for instance, how to begin in a non-mundane way? There are a few ideas that might be helpful. Macpherson believes that "the first paragraph is one of the most important of all, and its function is generally both introductory and programmatic in character" (2006: 21). But how to make the first paragraph arrest the reader's attention? It can begin with a question, a series of questions, a quotation or simply a statement.

The purpose of writing is to convey an idea. One can never overestimate well thought-out paragraphs in the right order. If young people feel that there is logic to the form required they may feel relieved. Macpherson suggests that the key thing is teach them segregate their ideas.

The principles underlying the arrangement of paragraphs are, of course, up to the writer. If he is writing a narrative, i.e. relating a story, recounting history, or describing a progress, they may be chronological, with each development clearly marked out from the preceding one. Or the paragraphs may be arranged according



to the categories of importance.(...) But whatever approach is taken, the structure of the work must be apparent, with clear, manageable paragraphs, each logically progressing one from the other. (...) Needless to say, great care must also be devoted to a clear, coherent introduction on the one hand and an equally clear conclusion on the other. (2006: 15)

Indeed, concluding with style is the skill of a master. How does one teach that? We all know that conclusions are the most mysterious part. Is it a summary of what has already been said? Or maybe we need to say something new? How to end? How to make this one last effort to complete one's work? Well, conclusions are the final thoughts on the topic. Written well, they add the last stroke to a picture painted by the rest of the text and leave the reader feeling that the author led him through the garden of his thoughts from the entrance gate to the exit. Oshima and Hogue (2006: 72) show a way out of the dilemma how to conclude successfully by offering the following ideas:

- Make a prediction
- Suggest results or consequences
- Suggest a solution
- Make a recommendation
- Call for action
- Quote an authority on the topic

Equipping students with the knowledge of how to start and finish their work will give them sense of security that all they need to come up with is the middle.

The most disliked, yet essential part of the process, is assessment. It is easy to read the papers through, grade them on the basis of adherence to the style requirements, return to the authors and forget all about it. Sadly, this is how most teachers treat this task. However, done properly, assessment is an inherent element of learning process. Doing it well, would require a lot of effort and dedication but it may eventually prove to be a truly rewarding task.

We have prepared a list of ideas that can help organize the checking process and transform it into an eventful exchange with your students.

- Do not grade the first attempt. They will expect a grade at some point but it does not have to be immediate.
- Make a note of grading their progress rather than their individual papers.
- Have your students write fewer essays. Your students will hopefully be quality-driven by this approach.
- Encourage them to keep a folder of a few versions of one essay.

- Correct and send back. We believe that being in touch with your students on an email-bases is better than handing over your comments on a soon-to-be-lost piece of paper.
- Make sure your students enjoy the process. If you take time to analyze their work from day one to the final piece they will pay attention, correct, rethink and learn on the way.

## 7. Sharing the experience

How to help students develop love for writing? First and foremost, the teacher's own attitude towards writing will inevitably influence the way he or she approaches the task and structures the process. It is difficult to evoke love for writing in the students if the teachers themselves don't feel comfortable in this activity. Secondly, writing has to be an enjoyable experience. Boscolo and Gelati stress the fact that in a traditional classroom writing is a solitary experience. They advocate perception of writing as a communicative activity that requires cooperation for exchange of thoughts and ideas. An activity promoting group work that was included in the workshop featured a collaborative story writing task in which the teacher plays a set of sounds like creaking door or rumble of thunder and the students' task is to create a story incorporating those sounds. Such an activity not only develops students' ability to create well structured stories and use appropriate language but also (or perhaps mainly) promotes cooperation in a group and strengthens bonds between individuals. As the authors put it:

In literate communities, students develop their identities as writers through activities in which they are involved with teachers in producing worthwhile material or expressing and sharing their own ideas with schoolmates (2007: 211)

Activities including description are also ideal for collaborative writing when students can exchange linguistic experiences and general knowledge developing their self perceptions. To the focus on the process and collaboration as elements of successful teaching of writing, Dolores Perin also adds enriching the language by teaching students to write increasingly complex sentences using language tools appropriate for given genre like verbs in stories, extreme adjectives or expressions of senses. The author also stresses the need to develop skills of gathering and categorizing information as well as providing models. She also encourages teachers to "use writing as a tool to facilitate adolescents' learning of content material" (2007: 260). Students are usually more eager to engage in a

writing task if the topic is interesting for them. This usually means that they perceive themselves as more or less expert in a given subject. Allowing them to write about their real interests has an added value of enriching their general knowledge in the subject content and boosting their self confidence.

Texts are powerful tools that shape, and sometimes even control, the minds of the readers. We as teachers put these tools in the hands of our students. It is up to us to show them their magnificent power of enchanting audiences and more mundane utilitarian functions of shaping individual realities. Whatever we do will exert immense impact on their future perception not only of the texts they read or write, but also of themselves as participants of the culture of a written word.

### **GET INSPIRED!**

The following examples feature ideas for writing activities that teenagers may find enjoyable and their teachers – inspirational.

### **50-WORD ESSAY COMPETITION**

The task is to write a composition including 10 words given by the teacher that is no longer or shorter than 50 words and makes sense!

### **TEXT ME!**

Imagine that you are witnessing a historic event like sinking of the Titanic or discovery of fire (the events may be prepared by the teacher and distributed on pieces of paper). The task is to write a short message of up to 160 characters to your parents/friends explaining why you are going to be late for dinner without giving out the actual names of the events. The rest of the class have to guess what event you are witnessing.

### **DIFFERENT POINTS OF VIEW**

A creative writing task. Ask the students to write a description of a place, scene, person from an unusual perspective. For example, they may write a description of the classroom from bird's-eye view or the city as observed through the

window of a moving bus. They may also imagine how Animals perceive the world and describe it as seen through their eyes.

### **THE BEST LEADER**

Ask the students to Invent false identities which include features of character, professions and experience. Tell them they are going to apply for the position of the President. Their task is to write a letter of application explaining why they are the best candidates for the post. They may also be asked to write a speech offering a solution to a given problem like pollution or crime.

### **AGONY COLUMN**

Divide the class into two groups: help seekers and agony aunts. Help seekers will write letters describing their problems (the teacher may prepare the problems and distribute them on pieces of paper) and agony aunts will respond.

### **THE WORST**

Most tasks in the course books require the students to write about “the best...”. However, this is much less exciting than writing about the worst. Students are most creative when they can express their negative emotions concerning the worst teachers, holidays, childhood memories or days in their lives. Describing nightmares is much more appealing than writing about dreams and accidents and ruins are so much more interesting than the most beautiful elements of urban architecture...

### **PENPALS**

Encourage the students to exchange real e-mails with people from all around the world in English by finding pen pals on the web sites like:

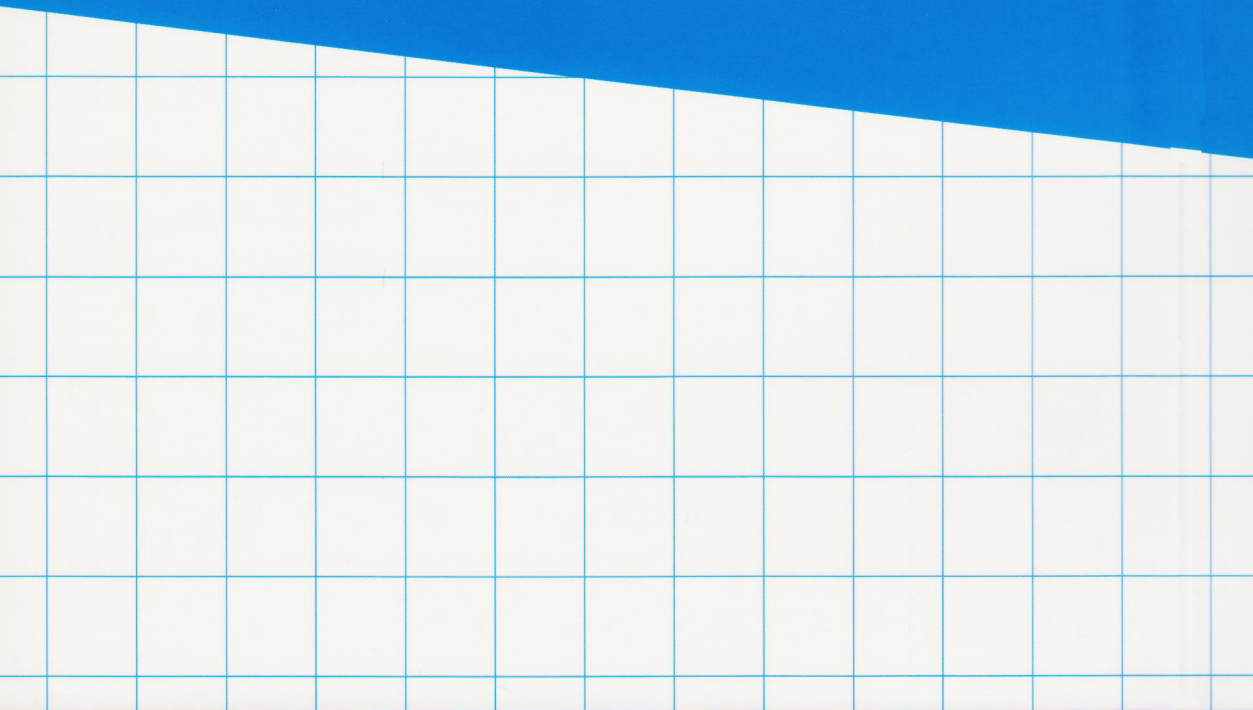
- [www.interpals.net](http://www.interpals.net)
- [www.penpalworld.com](http://www.penpalworld.com)
- or [www.britishpenpals.co.uk](http://www.britishpenpals.co.uk).

## PARAPHRASING

Take a few sentences from students' own writings and tell them to rewrite the sentences using as few (ideally no) words from the original as possible using thesaurus and dictionary of collocations. Tell them to read out their versions and choose the most interesting collocations, phrases to make new sentences. Ask students to compare the new versions with the originals and comment.

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