



## *Before Papers Come Paragraphs*

### Introductory Unit

#### Lesson 4, Part 1: Good vs. Bad Writing—What's the Difference?

#### The Denim *Beret* Writing Program

Supplies: writing notebook, pen or pencil; lesson 4, part 1 worksheet

Goal: to begin thinking critically about writing

Suggested time allowance: 2 sessions

Resource credits: *The Writer's Way*, by Jack Rawlins

## SESSION 1

### Warm-up: Writing from a List

This exercise is especially useful because it results in an idea bank for later writing projects. In your notebook you will create a list based on a topic of your choice. Then you will select one item from your list to write about. The possibilities for list topics are endless, but here are some ideas to get you started:

- best or worst life events
- your favorite movies/books/foods/etc.
- things that make you happy/sad/angry
- things at which you are an expert, places you would like to visit or have visited
- your most deeply held religious or moral beliefs
- things you would like to learn about.

Write your chosen topic at the top of a clean page in your "Writing Exercises" section. Add at least 10 things to your list. When you are finished, choose one item and write about it for 10-15 minutes.

### Introduction

By this time in your life, it is likely that you have read many kinds of writing: magazines, novels, textbooks, songbooks, poetry, picture books, newspapers, even cereal boxes! You have sifted through a variety of information and ideas and in the process made many judgments

about them, often without realizing it. How many times have you read an advertisement and wondered how you might get your parents to buy the product for you? How many times have you studied a textbook chapter and closed the book with something new tucked into your mind? How many times have you laughed over a comic strip...or perhaps raised a bewildered eyebrow? In all these situations your thoughts and judgments were affected by the way the authors chose to present their ideas. Whether or not you were affected in the ways they hoped largely depended on the quality of their writing.

The question is, what does “quality” mean in writing? In other words, what criteria make writing truly excellent--or is excellence only in the eye of the beholder? It is important to consider these questions carefully before you work toward producing excellent writing of your own. Without understanding what you are aiming for, your efforts will be trial-and-error and your road to excellence much longer.

### Lesson—What Excellent Writing is Not

What qualities are required for “excellent writing” is a debatable topic, of course, one about which many people could offer valid opinions. I don’t pretend to have the final, “right” answer; however, there are certain qualities that are universally recognized.

In a moment I am going to ask you to stop and think about what these qualities might be, because thinking critically about other people’s writing will help you learn to think critically about your own. In fact, critical analysis is one of the primary strategies that professional writers use to improve their own work. I’m going to give you some hints first, though. The following is a list of qualities that may seem necessary to excellent writing but actually are not:

- *A large vocabulary*—The most universally beloved books, those we remember from childhood, use simple words.
- *Complex sentences*—Same as above. Besides, short and punchy can pack power!
- *A brand-new idea*—This can grab attention, but that doesn’t mean the writer will explain it well or convince the reader it’s a good one.
- *An argument that’s indisputably true*—Readers may value this, but it doesn’t make the writing good.
- *The last word on its topic*—Similar to an indisputably true argument, winning a debate may help to change a reader’s thinking; however, if you present your side without finesse, crystal clarity, and strong support, your score will pack a weak punch.
- *Profound thinking*—Same as above. The content of a piece of writing can be powerful and amazing, but if the writing itself is weak, the author isn’t likely to impress readers much.

- *Extensive research or expertise*—This can win readers' respect and trust, but it doesn't make the writing good.
- *Extraordinary experience*—This can help keep your readers hooked, but sometimes the most mundane topics and ideas can be deeply meaningful for readers. If these topics/ideas are presented through beautiful writing, they can also be quite powerful.

No doubt there are other qualities we could add to this list, but let's look at the subject straight on, now. If the above qualities aren't the ticket to excellent writing, what qualities are?

### Stop and think about it...

At this point I want you to stop for a moment and take out your writing notebook; then continue with the lesson.

**STOP and turn to a clean page in the “Writing Notes” section. Write “Qualities of Excellent Writing” at the top. Then follow the directions below.**

Think for a moment about some of the best literature you have ever read. Consider both fiction and non-fiction. It can be any kind, anything at all, as well as any length. Consider what it was about these “bests” that made them excellent in your opinion, and write these qualities in a list on your paper. Are there any other qualities you feel are important to excellent writing? Write them down, too. Be sure to include qualities of both fiction and non-fiction in your list. Then read the remainder of the lesson below.

By the way, keep in mind that the best literature you have ever read isn't necessarily that which you most enjoyed. For example, the novel *Their Eyes Were Watching God*, by Zora Neale Hurston, is exquisitely written. In fact, when I think of truly brilliant writing, that is the first one that comes to mind. Still, while I liked the novel, it isn't one I would return to over and over like I would some other books. As you complete the exercise, then, also consider literature that was especially effective or meaningful or beautiful, not just ones you “liked”. **List as many qualities as you can think of, aiming for at least six**. If you get stuck, you may discuss the assignment with a parent or older sibling to get more ideas.

When you are finished, show it to your parent and discuss it as needed. Then continue with the lesson below.

## SESSION 2

### Lesson—What Excellent Writing Is:

Here are some qualities that I feel are important to good writing, generally speaking:

- strong vocabulary (as opposed to complicated or large)
- sentence variety—different lengths and structures
- interesting/engaging
- hooks you from the start
- ends in a way that gives reader a sense of completion and/or satisfaction
- true to its genre—for example, if it presents itself as a mystery, it really is one
- neither rambles on its topic nor cuts it too short
- has a clear beginning, middle, and end
- logical and coherent
- original, not a copy of someone else (either style or content)
- technically correct—sentences are grammatical, punctuation used properly, etc.
- easy or at least possible to follow/understand
- makes me come away from it better off than when I started
- beautiful and/or excellent presentation
- a distinctive voice

Note that not *all* these qualities are important to *all* types of writing; this is just a general list. For instance, a news article needs to be informative and accurate, not original or imaginative.

When all these qualities (and perhaps even a few more) are combined, we can group them into a simpler list that I call the “six traits of excellent writing.” They include the following:

- *audience*--Keep in mind your potential readers as you develop and write your essay.
- *purpose*--Determine what you want to accomplish for your readers by the conclusion of your essay (inspire, entertain, inform, etc.).
- *tone*--Choose the attitude you will take to accomplish your purpose for your potential audience.
- *beauty*--Choose appropriate, lovely, and/or moving expression of ideas for the type of essay you will write.
- *truth*--Be genuine, honest, thorough, and accurate as your essay requires; follow the essential principles of the type of essay you are writing (i.e.--If you are writing a literary analysis, you stay focused on your thesis statement and provide textual evidence for your ideas.).
- *voice*--Write with your own distinctive style and manner, which must be true to who you are.

We'll discuss these traits more in part 2 of lesson 4, as well later in the program. For now, just start to memorize them. As you improve your writing skills, these traits should gradually become goals to meet with every essay you write. Learning how to apply them effectively will help you become a truly excellent writer!

## Exercise

Complete the lesson 4, part 1 worksheet. When you are finished, discuss it with your parent as needed and continue to lesson 4, part 2.

