



Before Papers Come Paragraphs

Introductory Unit

Lesson 5: Understanding the Writing Process

The Denim *Beret* Writing Program

Supplies: "House of Words" handout, lesson 5 worksheet, writing notebook/pen

Goal: to understand the basic process used to produce a polished manuscript.

Suggested Time: 4 sessions

SESSION 1

Warm-up: Personal Response to Other Subjects

Just as with literature, responding to other subjects you are studying can help you process and think about what you are learning. If you are studying astronomy, for example, you might reflect on how big the galaxy is compared to Earth. If you are studying the Civil War, you might discuss whether it was justified or how it changed the South. Anything you are studying can be a topic for a personal response, especially ideas, people, and events. Pick one and write for 10 minutes.

Introduction

By this point in your education, you probably understand that writing is a process. Whether it's a grocery list or the Great American Novel, you probably also know that all writing starts with an idea. The writer must develop the idea with explanations, arguments, and support, and then express it all in strong writing. The process seems very clear when viewed that way—kind of like a satellite image of Earth with its simplistic view of continents, clouds, and oceans.

Even when we zoom in, though, the writing process remains relatively simple. The three steps now become six, and six they will remain, no matter how complex the project becomes. You could write a novel longer than *War and Peace*, and it would still take only six steps! If you can master some basic techniques for completing these steps, any struggles you have with writing will be drastically reduced. This is because the mystery of how to get from lightbulb to

masterpiece will be forever solved, and you will never again have to wonder, “Now what do I do?” This knowledge won’t make the actual writing easier, since it is a creative act requiring both skill and artistry. It will, however, provide a reliable method that will apply to everything you write (okay, maybe not your grocery lists). The more you learn about the six steps of the writing process, the more confident a writer you will become.

Lesson, part 1: House of Words

We will discuss the six steps of the writing process in a moment, but let’s get an overview of it first. Before diving deeply into a subject, it is helpful to see the big picture first, especially if you are a visual learner. To do so you will need the handout entitled “House of Words.”

STOP and open the handout, “House of Words.” Then continue reading the lesson.

The house you see on the handout is one way to visualize a polished manuscript. On the handout I have used three colors: blue, green, and red. Each color represents a major aspect of composition.

The features on the house colored **blue** are the foundation and framework. These give the house its shape. The inhabitants never see them; yet, without them the house will collapse. In an essay or paper, the foundation and framework are the writer’s preparation, as well as the paper’s organization and structure. These elements are at the core of an effective, well-written essay.

If you look carefully at the **green** lines, you will see that they outline the substance of the house: the walls, windows, doors, and floor—all the things that a house needs to be livable. In writing, this substance is your content, and it is built on the foundation and framework so that it is logical and coherent. Content includes your research, details, descriptions, characters, plot, facts, opinions, and ideas. Your content holds the reasons you are writing in the first place.

Last are the features colored **red**. They include the decorations—the trim, flowers, fireplace smoke, and curtains. I used red because it is bright, cheerful, and fun; it adds life and sparkle wherever it goes. Red stands for the style and originality with which you lay out your content. It is the spit-shine you add at the end to attract readers. It helps convince them to take you seriously, because you show pride in your work. These “decorations” include such elements as distinctive voice, powerful vocabulary, interesting turns of phrase, varied sentences, vivid imagery, and poetic techniques.

Now we’ll talk more about the writing process itself—how we build this “house of words.” Remember that I said this process entails six steps, none of which you should skip for serious

projects. There are times, of course, when you can take shortcuts on one or more of the steps; it all depends on what you are writing. You will need to make that judgment for each project.

Lesson, part 2: The Writing Process Explained

✓ STEP ONE: PREWRITING

Prewriting is the foundation of all structured writing, involving brainstorming, planning, and organizing. It is also a step that many of us are tempted to skip. Sometimes you can without a problem, but skipping it is never a good idea for important writing projects. Eventually you can adapt the prewriting process to suit your preferences, but for now, while you are learning, you will need to practice it the way I teach it.

✓ STEP TWO: ROUGH DRAFT

This is the one step that can't be skipped, no matter what you are writing, even if it is just a quick email. It is the step in which you write down your ideas in an appropriate form--list, chart, poem, or paragraph. Drafting is arguably the simplest step to accomplish, once you have mastered some basic composition skills. All you do is sit down, review your prewriting notes, and write! The best part about drafting is that once it's done, the most intimidating part of your project is behind you. This is also the one step in which you're allowed to be messy and make lots of mistakes. It's called a "rough" draft for a reason, so feel free relax and let your writing flow. Your inner critic can get to work in the next step.

✓ STEP THREE: REVISING

Revision is all about improving the content of a manuscript, or *what* you say. For me, revision has become a habit over the years. Some people enjoy it more than drafting, and others consider it tedious. Either way, revision essential to a well-written manuscript. All writers must make peace with it, especially professional writers. Many editors require authors to make major revisions to their manuscripts before they will approve them for publication. For instance, I once read about a writer who was asked to cut 100 pages (that's 100, folks!) from his manuscript. Can you imagine how daunting that must have been? Revision of that magnitude takes a *lot* of work! Still, it is part of the writer's job, just as multiple rehearsals of the same scene are part of an actor's job. Many students, however, aren't yet used to the idea of revising their work; they tend to see revision as either a punishment or a time-

waster. The essay is complete, after all. It can be hard to imagine what more a teacher might want.

To revise effectively, you will need to ignore grammar, spelling, and other minor issues and focus only on what you are trying to communicate and how you choose to do it. You will examine the manuscript's ideas, coherence, accuracy, originality...everything related your content and structure. You may find, for example, that you need to completely rewrite entire sections, reorder them, add information, or even cut large chunks of text--sometimes even your favorite parts!--in order to express your ideas most effectively. Most importantly, you will need to know how to read your writing through the eyes of your readers, so that you can better identify and address your weaknesses.

✓ STEP FOUR: EDITING

So, you've completed your revisions to the best of your ability, and finally the grunt work is over. Now you are ready to polish your paper using the last three steps of the writing process. The first of these is editing, which is where you examine your writing at the sentence level—grammar, diction, style, and flow. It is not about *what* you say but about *how* you say it. If you are naturally strong in grammar and have a flair for writing smooth, flowing sentences, you may enjoy this step. If, however, you struggle with grammar, you may find editing to be one of the hardest steps. For you it is time for a thorough, systematic grammar program. To become an excellent writer, you must master the inner workings of your own language.

I know that this sounds as appealing as a cavity filling, but I promise you that if you complete a good grammar program (which should also include mechanics, sentence-building, and style), you will find editing so much easier. You will be able to relax and enjoy writing more, because you will have greater confidence in your use of language. Plus, you will be better able to add artistic panache to your writing.

If you have studied grammar and still find editing difficult, I encourage you to keep working at it. Strive to improve your language skills, so that you can become as independent a writer as possible. Even so, you may always need to seek help when you get to the editing step. Whether you have strong language skills or not, though, it is a good idea to edit your work as best you can and then ask one or two trusted people to look it over, too. Some writers even pay for editing assistance before they send their manuscripts to publishers, so that their work has a better chance of acceptance. You will be amazed at

how easy it is to miss errors when you edit your own work, even if you are highly skilled, so take your time and don't be afraid to ask for help.

✓ STEP FIVE: PROOFREADING

When you are satisfied with *what* you have said and *how* you have said it, you are ready for proofreading. In a way this is my favorite step, because I feel a sense of accomplishment now that the creative part of my work is finished. All that's left to worry about is the tiny details.

Be careful, though! It is easy to get careless during this step and underestimate its importance. The mistakes you find may be small, but they can have a powerful effect on your essay. Many tiny mistakes can add up to be so glaring that they can ruin the effect of the whole. Your hard work should shine like a polished jewel, and mistakes have the same effect as smudges. When they dim the beauty of your work, readers will want to put it down. Not only that, when your readers start to notice your mistakes, they may begin to question your writing ability and even the credibility of your ideas. Poor proofreading shows a lack of pride and care in your work. If your work is sloppy, your readers may wonder if they should even listen to you.

Once again, if you struggle with spelling and mechanics, which account for most proofreading errors, ask someone else to proofread your work after you do. And don't proofread only once! Even if you proofread the same paper five times, you will still overlook errors on occasion no matter how skilled you are. The best way to approach this step is to proofread your manuscript multiple times, giving yourself a few hours or days in between readings to clear your mind. When you believe your work is perfect, you will be done! Then you will have only one step left!

✓ STEP SIX: PUBLISHING

Ah, you've made it! You've worked hard and polished your work until it shines. But wait, you must still complete one more step to finish well. That is "publishing."

Used in this context, the term does not necessarily mean being professionally bound and sold in a bookstore. All it means is that your piece is formatted in accordance with your purpose and that it is presented neatly and attractively. Depending on your audience and purpose, it could be handwritten on pretty stationery or typed and tucked into a report cover or comb-bound at the local printer with an illustrated cover. There are a hundred

ways to complete the publishing step. Publishing is all about making your manuscript appeal to your audience, like a window display in a department store. At minimum, be sure you produce a final copy that is clean and neat.

Conclusion

And now, at long last, you can call your manuscript “finished.” If you have done your best, be satisfied and pleased with your work. Store a copy carefully, so that someday you can look back and see how far you’ve come. Some people look back at their early writing, especially if they receive negative feedback from someone else, and they think, “Wow, this is terrible! Ugh!” Then they throw it away or burn their hard work! But don’t. All your writing represents a piece of you, even your worst pieces. Someday, years down the road, this written record may be very special to you and your family—and maybe even future historians! So save it, look back at it sometimes, reflect on your writing journey...and then keep growing. Each essay, story, poem, and paper you write is a rung on your ladder toward excellence.

SESSIONS 2-4

Exercises

Complete the lesson 5 worksheet.