DO AS I SAY *AND* AS I DO: CREATING STRONG WRITERS BY EMPHASIZING AND MODELING THE PROCESS

Haven Massey
Wichita State University

Abstract
When I was a high schooler, my knowledge of the writing process was slim, thus forcing me into a box of mediocrity. My collegiate experience has opened my eyes to my misunderstanding of drafting, revising, and editing and how that stunted me as a writer. In this reflection, I consider my lackluster methods, explore better options, and consider how I can implement these in the classroom to prevent my students from falling down the same path of comfortable stagnancy.

Keywords: composition, literacy, drafting, revising, editing, grammar, peer review, writing process, writer's notebook

Introduction

I have something exciting to share with you. I initially drafted this reflection in a *writer's notebook*! As I type this now, I am painstakingly transcribing my messy handwriting into a neat serif typeface. I know what you are thinking*, Haven, that sounds like a tedious process, and writing 10 pages by hand sounds hand-cramp-inducing!* Yes, and yes. (Send up a prayer for my left hand please.) However, it is significant to both my current writing process and the process I plan to implement in my future classroom practice. I will delve more into why I chose to go this route later in my reflection. For now, I want to share some sources I consulted to help me answer the question, how will I design instruction that helps students develop habits that enhance their writing lives?

A Look into the Past

Randy Bomer, teacher, professor, and former president of the National Council of Teachers of English (NCTE), explores this question and others in his book *Building Adolescent Literacy in Today's English Classrooms*. And I must say, as I read his chapters on the writing process, I faced an overwhelming desire to shake my freshman-in-high school self and force her to read up on drafting, revising, and editing.

After some reflection, I concluded that my successes as an English student primarily stemmed from my natural knack for writing. I can organize my thoughts in an understandable way, back them up with evidence, and frame them with an engaging hook and satisfying conclusion. Basically, it walks like an essay, it talks like an essay, it must be an essay! And sure, these were good papers, but they weren't doing anything extraordinary.

My first draft was almost always my final draft minus a *bit* of editing and implementing a fancy word or two (*immense* and *conversely*—I'm looking at you). As articulated by Bomer, I "[wrote] the text as [I thought] it should appear" (2011, p. 206). I did not stop and take the time to fully explore my ideas and become an expert on my topic. Instead, I relied on my writing process to get me the grade I wanted and to please my teacher. Bomer touches on how common this is in the lives of students and its inevitable downfall: "[I]t's simply not enough to write at the demand of a teacher in order to be judged according to how well the writer accomplished the reader's purpose.… Even those who do write well under those conditions aren't learning to be writers, just reinforcing their status as someone's student" (2011, p. 200).

All this to say, was the writing I was doing bad? I wouldn't say so. But it was formulaic and comfortable and ironically enough, it didn't require much thinking. It looked like effectively organizing my (underdeveloped) thoughts and supporting them with evidence from texts or individuals who have put in the work of developing strong stances and ideas. I used their deep thinking as a crutch to support my own lackluster process.

I think if I were to put forth the effort of drafting, revising, and editing productively, I would have surprised myself as a writer. I would have forced myself into places of discomfort which would have resulted in inevitable growth. Rather than assigning essays and hoping my students will naturally develop these skills, I need to instead implement scaffolding into my practice that helps my students sharpen their writing in a way that I never took the time to do.

Implementing and Emphasizing *the Process*

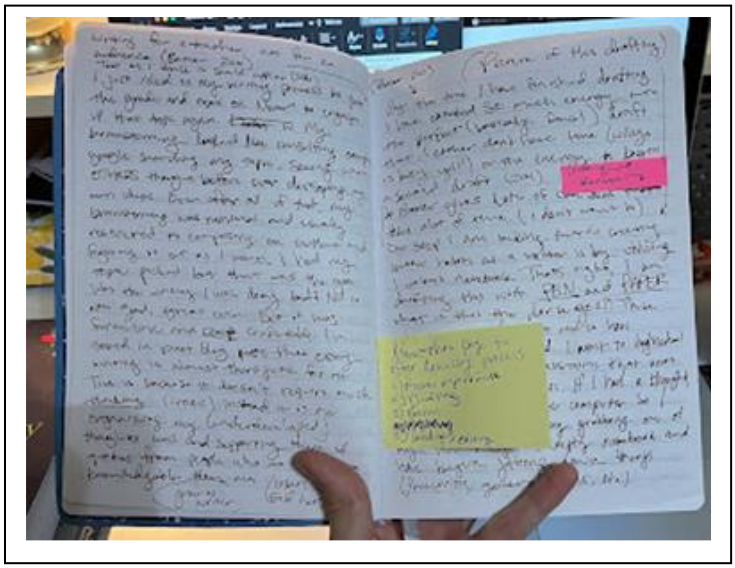
So how do I get my students to this point? How do I prevent them from developing poor writing habits that they rely on until their **senior year of college**? Well, a primary issue starts not at the beginning, but at the end. Too often, students write with the end goal being the final product, thus it becomes their primary focus. There is a lack of emphasis on the process which is essential to developing not only strong academic writing but writing lives in general. Teachers hold the responsibility of communicating this importance and encouraging students to implement it into their practice. In this excursion, it is pertinent that we give time for the students to complete this process **in class**. If we never engage in the writing process in our classroom, we are telling students that these elements are not important enough to be worthy of our precious class time. Instead, they are reduced to completion at home on their own time. We do not hold them accountable for this practice and it shifts to the wayside.

When emphasizing the process, there is a responsibility to distinguish between the elements of drafting, revision, and editing which in my practice, I have found to be used interchangeably.

Drafting

As I noted initially in this reflection, I started drafting within my newly started writer's notebook. What once was a random empty journal I had on my shelf is now *the chosen one*. And guess what: I drafted with real-life **pen and paper**! What is this the dark ages?? Many of my high school classrooms were entirely paperless so the idea of conveying all my ideas in hard copy is initially uncomfortable. But as we have established, my stunted growth as a writer is largely a result of my stubbornness to venture out of the box of my own mediocrity. I have been using this notebook to jot down a multitude of expressions (freewriting, general ideas, drafting, etc.). Because if I plan to encourage my students to participate in this activity, I better have tested it out myself! This experiment has caused me to (surprise surprise) realize how much is swimming around this little noggin of mine if I just write to think (Bomer, 2011, p. 172). I am attaching a photo of my earliest draft of this reflection, as you can see, I have added notes to myself in the margins and where space

didn't allow, added sticky notes. I also decide to switch around the order of my pages after constructing my draft.



The choice to include these pages was largely inspired by Cynthia Urbanski, a former secondary-level educator and teacher consultant for the UNC Charlotte Writing Project. In her book *Using the Workshop Approach in the High School English Classroom*, she includes the drafting process for her book within the text itself (Urbanski, 2015, p. 66).

I also have created a space that allows me to get in a proper headspace to write by hand for a long stretch of time (I'll admit, this space makes me feel like a brooding 1800s writer—really capturing my Jo March dreams). This was inspired by Randy Bomer's urging towards teachers to guide their students to consider spaces where they can be most productive (2011, pp. 58-59).

Giving students opportunities to draft through a writing notebook forces them to slow down and generate ideas. Often, it is essential for students to just *start writing*. Anne Lamott, American novelist and non-fiction writer, highlights this in her book, *Bird by Bird*: "A friend of mine says that the first draft is the down draft—you just get it down. The second draft is the up draft—you fix it up. You try to say what you have to say more accurately. And the third draft is the dental draft, where you check every tooth, to see if it's loose or cramped or decayed, or even, God help us, healthy" (1997, p. 2).

Revision

So, the student has a draft down. You tell them they need to revise. If they're anything like me, they will have exerted so much energy into their perfect (basically final) draft and now can't find the time or the will to revise the piece. Thankfully, Bomer provides a plethora of ideas on how to push students into productive revision (2011, p. 208). And if you have done the drafting process right, the student will not see their current writing as a perfect expression of their thoughts, but instead, something that can continue to be shaped and strengthened. It is time to stop this notion that revision means that the writing is bad and needs to be redone. As Bomer puts it, "[O]nce a text is written, it feels like punishment to have to rewrite it," and he suggests that we instead teach the writing as "reopen[ing] the text to develop content and to find the best arrangement of sections" (2011, p. 210). Revision should be exhilarating! It is a process that allows a student to delve deeper

into aspects they are excited about and develop their paper to its full potential. As Bomer notes in a section about writer's notebooks, "[they] are stuffed with little twigs of potential development" (2011, p. 192). While this quote applies to more casual writing, what if we could also help our students discover and find thrills in the vast possibilities that lay within their own writing?

Editing and Grading

Somehow, this final element seems to have become the focus and fixation of young writers and sometimes … even teachers. This is something that I fell victim to when working on my own papers or participating in peer review. Even last week in my field experience classroom, I witnessed a small group of students peer reviewing a paper together. I watched as they meticulously marked every conventional error with their multicolored pens. Every comma splice, incorrect internal citation, and grammatical error was emphasized. They spent so much time on this that they had little to no time to evaluate their peer's actual *content*—their ideas and evidence—before having to move on to the next victim.

Why did this happen? Because students are taught and consistently drilled with the idea that conventions are of the highest importance. That is what teachers continue to convey to students. Not the ideas being shared but instead the shiny box they are captured within (hence my half-baked ideas with fancy words and em-dashes squeezed by with A's). That's what I felt was important and these thoughts were continuously reinforced within me. So, instead of refining ideas and digging deeper to become an expert on a given topic, students instead focus on whether they used a colon correctly.

I am not saying that we should not hold students accountable for using standard English and following grammar rules, but that is not the whole point! In fact, these aspects don't even need to be focused on until the final stage of the writing process. It is easy to grade conventions rather than evaluate the students' ideas (which explains why it is such an easy target in peer review) but if we only focus on comma splices and spelling errors, a very small part of composing, we are failing our young writers and making writing feel inaccessible.

Final Thoughts

I want to end this reflection by highlighting a point that was made by my Theory and Practice in Composition professor: No one is *born* a writer. Every single person who writes has learned to do it. It is a technology that humans constructed to communicate with one another. Sure, some people are naturally more skilled at it than others, but like any other skill, it requires practice done frequently and intentionally. We as teachers bear the responsibility of facilitating that practice so our writers can reach their full potentials.

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Author Biography

Haven Massey graduated from Wichita State University in May 2024 with a major in Secondary English Education and a minor in Theatre. She presented at the 2023 Kansas Association of Teachers of English (KATE) Conference and will begin her teaching career at Maize South High School in August. She can be reached at havengrace9@gmail.com.