

Why Writing Programs Fail

When I first began teaching literature and writing at the College of William and Mary in Virginia, over ten years ago, my freshmen weren't exactly polished writers. Out of every class of thirty freshmen students, four or five would turn in grammatically correct, coherent, clean papers. Of those, perhaps two would show a real grasp of persuasive writing.

Ten years later, even that percentage has dropped. I read through scores of incoherent, fragmented, unpunctuated papers, written by students who graduated from well-funded high schools with small classrooms and qualified teachers.

What are those students being taught before they get to me?

It's not that they don't write. In fact, in an effort to solve the problem of poor writing skills, schools are giving longer and more complex assignments to younger and younger children. The theory is that the more writing children do, the better they'll get at it; as one proponent of it recently told me, "Give the children high-interest assignments and have them write, write, write and revise, revise, revise." First and second graders are told to write journal entries; third and fourth graders are assigned book reports and essays. Fifth and sixth graders are given research papers.

Meanwhile, writing skills continue to decline. And for the last ten years, at education conferences all across the country, I have heard the same refrain from the parents of these children: *My child hates to write.*

There's a central problem with the write-more-and-you'll-get-better method. It treats writing as though it were analogous to speech: the more deeply you're immersed in it, the more competent you'll become.

But writing is essentially unlike speaking. Children have an instinctual, inborn

desire to speak. Any child who is developing normally will learn to speak if spoken to. The more a child talks, the better her verbal skills become.

Children don't have that same innate drive to write. Some children scribble as soon as they can hold a pencil, but the majority don't. Even children who are taught to read and are surrounded by written language do not necessarily learn how to write—because speech and writing are fundamentally different.

Writing, unlike speech, isn't a natural activity. Mankind survived for a very long time without finding it necessary to put anything down on paper. Until the nineteenth century (which is quite late, in the larger scheme of things) even the largest empires chugged along perfectly well with shockingly low literacy rates. Administrators and bureaucrats had to be able to read and write, but the masses functioned quite well without paper and pencil. If they'd been unable to talk, on the other hand, their country would have fallen apart.

Written language is an unnatural foreign language, an artificially constructed code. Compare written dialogue with any transcript of an actual conversation, and you'll see that written language has entirely different conventions, rules, and structures than spoken language. The rules of this foreign language must be learned by the beginning writer—and they have to become second nature before the beginning writer can use written language to express ideas.

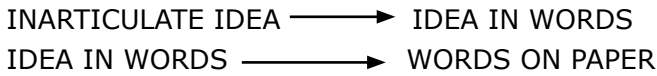
This is why so many young writers panic, freeze, weep, or announce that they hate to write. Try to put yourself in the position of the beginning writing student: Imagine that you've had a year or so of conversational French, taught in a traditional way out of a textbook, with practice in speaking twice a week or so. After that first year, your teacher asks you to explain the problem of evil in French. You're likely to experience brain freeze: a complete panic, a frantic scramble for words, a halting and incoherent attempt to express complicated ideas in a medium which is unfamiliar. Even another year or two of study won't make this kind of self-expression possible. Rather, the conventions of the French language need to become second nature, automatic—invisible to you—so that you can concentrate on the ideas, rather than on the medium used to express them.

The same is true for young writers. Ask a student to express ideas in writing before she is completely fluent in the rules and conventions of written language, and she'll freeze. She can't express her thoughts in writing, because she's still wrestling with the basic means of expression itself.

I have become convinced that most writing instruction is fundamentally

flawed because children are never taught the most basic skill of writing, the skill on which everything rests: how to put words down on paper.

Writing is a process that involves two distinct mental steps. First, the writer puts an idea into words; then, she puts the words down on paper.



Mature writers are able to do both steps without paying much attention to the fact that their brains are actually carrying out two different operations. But for the beginning writer, even a simple writing exercise (“Write down what you did this morning”) requires the simultaneous performance of two new and difficult things. And so the student struggles—just as a baby who has barely learned to walk will struggle if you simultaneously ask him to perform some other task (such as rubbing his head). All of the baby’s attention needs to go into moving his feet, until that action becomes automatic. If you ask him to walk and rub his head, he’ll probably freeze in one place, swaying back and forth uncertainly—just like many new writers.

Young writers need time to learn the conventions of their new language. They need to become *fluent* in it before they can use it to express new ideas. But in most cases, students are simply immersed in this new language of writing. While immersion techniques often work for spoken foreign languages, they don’t work nearly as well for writing—which is, after all, an artificial code rather than a natural speech expression.

Occasionally, this process produces a perfectly willing and competent writer—one who has a natural affinity for writing, and can intuitively grasp those parts of the process which have not been explicitly taught. But other students remain puzzled. They became frustrated and resistant, always struggling with the task of getting words on paper, never competent enough to let their ideas flow out.

Instead, the process of writing needs to be taught in an orderly, step-by-step method that will set young writers free to *use* their medium rather than wrestle with it.