The Three Stages

This book is a foundational text: it focuses on those all-important early years of writing. In these elementary years (roughly, grades one through four) the student masters the new and unfamiliar process of writing: putting ideas into words and putting those words down on paper.

He will begin by pulling apart the two steps of writing and practicing them separately. This is the essence of good teaching: breaking tasks down into their component elements and teaching students how to perform each element, before putting the elements back together. The pianist practices first the right hand, and then the left hand, before putting the two together; the young writer practices putting ideas into words, and then putting words down on paper, before trying to do both simultaneously.

Good writing requires *training*. It demands one-on-one attention. What follows will equip you to *train* the young student in the language of writing.

Writing with Ease (Years 1–4)

Elementary-school writing consists of copywork, dictation, and narration, all of which develop the student's basic skills with written language.

Years One and Two: Practicing Narration

Before requiring the student to write, teach him to *narrate.* Narration happens when the student takes something he's just read (or heard you read) and puts it into his own words.

This begins on a very simple level: You read to the student and ask him specific questions about what he's heard, such as "What was the most interesting thing in that story?" or "Who was that history lesson about?" You then require

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him to *answer you in complete sentences.* As the student grows more familiar with the process of narration, you can move on to more general questions such as "Summarize what we just read in your own words."

As the young student narrates out loud, he is practicing the first part of the writing process: putting an idea into his own words. He is practicing a new and difficult skill without having to come up with original ideas first; because his narrations are always rooted in content that he's just read or heard, he can concentrate on the task of expressing himself with words.

He is also practicing this new skill without having to worry about the *second* part of the writing process: putting those words down on paper. As he narrates, you—the teacher—write the words down for him as he watches. He can simply concentrate on the task at hand, without worrying about the mechanical difficulties of wielding a pencil. (For students whose fine motor skills are still developing, this is *essential*; they cannot focus on narration if they're also contemplating how much their hand is going to hurt when they have to write the narration down.)

Years One and Two: Copywork and Dictation

Separately, and preferably at a different time during the day, the student begins to master the second part of the process: putting words down on paper. This is not a simple task. It requires physical labor, fine motor coordination, and an understanding of the rules that govern written presentation: capitalization, punctuation, spacing, letter formation.

This skill is developed through copywork and dictation. Copywork and dictation allow the student to master the second step of the process without having to worry about the first, difficult task of putting ideas into words.

The beginning student doesn't even know yet how written language is supposed to look. Before he can put words down on paper, he must have some visual memory of what those words are supposed to look like. So during first grade, he'll copy out sentences from good writers, practicing the look and feel of properly written language.

Once the student has become accustomed to reproducing, on his own paper, properly written sentences placed in front of him as a model, you'll take the model away. Now that his mind is stocked with mental images of properly written language, he needs to learn how to visualize a written sentence in his mind and then put it down on paper.

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From second grade on, rather than putting the written model in front of the student, you will dictate sentences to him. This will force him to bring his memory into play, to picture the sentence in his mind before writing it down. Eventually you'll be dictating two and three sentences at a time to a student, encouraging him to hold longer and longer chunks of text in his mind as he writes.

Many students who struggle with writing put down sentences that are lacking in punctuation, capitalization, or spacing—a clue that they have never learned to picture written language in their minds. Others can tell you with great fluency exactly what they want to write; if you then say to them, "Great! Write that down!" they'll ask, "What did I just say?" Both are clues that students have not learned to visualize sentences and hold them in mind—both essential if the student is ever going to get words down on paper. Moving from copywork to dictation develops these skills.

Years Three and Four: Putting the Two Steps Together

Around third grade, most students are ready to begin putting the two skills together. In third grade, students will begin to use part of their own narrations as dictation exercises. They will tell you the narration; you will write it down for them, and then dictate the first sentence back to them. Eventually they will learn that, in order to write, all they need to do is put an idea into words (something they've practiced extensively through narration), and then put those words down on paper (which they're accustomed to doing during dictation).

They will begin to write.

During the last two years of the elementary grades, you will concentrate on drawing the two skills together for the student. Some students will be able to bring the two steps together instinctively, without a struggle. But many need to be led through the process gradually, with plenty of practice, so that it can become second nature—and if they are not given this practice, they continue to struggle into middle school, high school, and beyond.

What You're Not Doing

But what about journaling, book reports, and imaginative writing?

In Years One through Four, it's not necessary for the student to do original writing. In fact, original writing (which requires not only a mastery of both steps of the writing process, but the ability to find something original to *say*) is beyond the developmental capability of many students.

There is plenty of time for original writing as the student's mind matures.

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During the first four years, it is *essential* that students be allowed instead to concentrate on mastering the process: getting ideas into words, and getting those words down on paper.

Some children may be both anxious and willing to do original writing. This should never be discouraged. However, it should not be required either. Students who are required to write, write, write during elementary school are likely to produce abysmal compositions. Take the time to lay a foundation first; during the middle- and high-school years, the student can then build on it with confidence.

What Comes After the Fundamentals?

You're preparing your student to move into Years Five throught Eight, the middle grades, when she'll learn how to put ideas in order; this in turn will prepare her for Years Nine throught Twelve, the high-school study of rhetoric (persuasive communication). Although you don't need to know what comes next in order to lay a strong foundation, I suggest that you read on so that you can gain an overview of the entire writing process.

Alternately, you can go directly to "Where Should I Begin?" on page 25, and start building that foundation right away.

Writing with Skill (Years 5–8)

In the middle grades the student learns to organize sentences into short compositions.

By now, he can put ideas he's already read into his own words and get those words down on paper without difficulty. The technical difficulty of learning the act of writing has been conquered. But until the student can begin to think about the *order* in which ideas should be set down, he'll continue to struggle with written composition. So during the middle-grade years, you'll help the student develop a toolbox of strategies for putting ideas into order.

Learning how to *order* ideas takes place on the microlevel (the sentence) and also on the macrolevel (the composition itself).

Diagramming: Sentence-Level Ordering

The primary tool that students will use to order ideas on the sentence level is diagramming. The middle-school student will learn to think critically about the structure of his sentences; he will use diagramming as a tool to fix weak sentences.

Weak sentences reveal problems in thinking.

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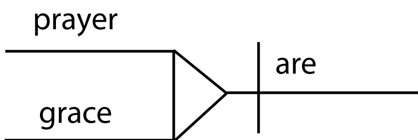
A sentence which fits logically together is a sentence which is written in good style (poor style is most often the result of fuzzy thinking). Now that the student can get sentences down on paper, he needs to sharpen and focus them. Whenever a sentence doesn't "sound right" to him, he should examine the logical relationships between the parts of the sentence. Diagramming the sentence lays the logic of the sentence bare.

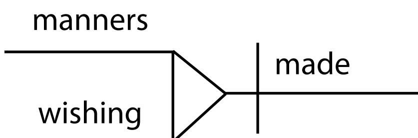
Consider the following balanced and beautiful sentence, from nineteenth-century poet Gerard Manley Hopkins: "Our prayer and God's grace are like two buckets in a well; while the one ascends, the other descends." Compare the sound of this sentence to a typical freshman composition thesis statement (this from an actual seminar paper I received several years ago from a student): "In *Pride and Prejudice,* her mother's bad manners and wishing to get married made Elizabeth discontent." While the second sentence makes sense, it's an ugly sentence—the kind that makes parents and teachers despair.

If the middle-grade student is able to diagram both sentences, she'll be able to see for herself why the first sentence resonates, while the second clunks.

In the Hopkins sentence, the subject and verb of the first independent clause are diagrammed like this:



The second sentence also has a compound subject and single verb:



Although the second sentence is grammatically correct, it's ugly because the two subjects are two different kinds of words. "Manners" is a noun, while "wishing" is a gerund—a verb form *used* as a noun. Words which occupy parallel places on a diagram should take the same form—as in the Hopkins sentence, where "prayer" and "grace" are both nouns.

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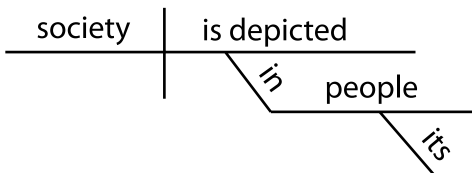
If the student sets out to fix the style problem in the second sentence, she'll also be forced to clarify her thinking. The noun "manners" represents something that Elizabeth's mother is doing *to* her; it's an outside circumstance. The verb form "wishing" is internal; it's Elizabeth's own action which is forcing her to be discontent. The two causes of her discontent aren't parallel. So what is the relationship between them? Do the mother's bad manners represent an entire social sphere from which Elizabeth longs to escape? Does she wish for a more genteel life, and does she wish to get married because that will allow her to move from one kind of life to another? Or is marriage itself Elizabeth's driving passion? Does she simply resent her mother's bad manners because they jeopardize her chances of attracting a bridegroom?

The middle-grade student won't necessarily understand all of this, but learning to diagram sentences will allow her to begin to understand the relationship between style and thought. Bad style is almost always a thinking problem, not a surface blemish.

For a slightly different illustration of this, consider the following sentence, also drawn from a freshman composition assignment, and containing a very common sort of beginning-writer error: "In addition to the city, Theodore Dreiser's society is depicted in its people."

This is the kind of sentence that *almost* makes sense; it's clear that the writer has an idea in mind, but that idea isn't coming through to the reader. But how can the student locate the problem?

Through diagramming. In this case, the subject (society) and verb (is depicted) are diagrammed on a simple subject/verb line, with the prepositional phrase "in



its people" diagrammed underneath the verb (it is acting as an adverb, because it answers the question "how"). But where should "In addition to the city" go?

It doesn't seem to fit anywhere. Are the society and city both depicted? (If so, what's the difference?) Is the society depicted in its people or in its city? (Neither is particularly clear.) The moral of this particular diagramming exercise: if you can't put it on the diagram, it doesn't belong in the sentence. The author of this

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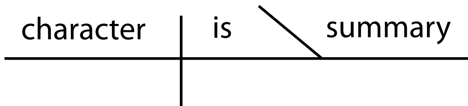
sentence doesn't exactly know what Dreiser is depicting, and he's hoping to sneak his fuzzy comprehension past the reader.

One final example, this one slightly more subtle: "Therefore, the character of Irene is a summary of women of the time." This is a very common sort of beginner sentence: it makes sense, but it sounds immature. Why?



The tip-off to the problem is the slanting line, which indicates that the noun to the right is a predicate nominative. A predicate nominative must *rename* the subject. But "summary" is not another word for "character." The two are not even roughly parallel; a character can't be a summary any more than an elephant can be a mouse.

Diagramming teaches style, through clarifying the student's thought process; it begins to force the student to order ideas.

Outlining: Composition-Level Ordering

In this phase of the writing process, the student learns how to outline.

Writing programs suggest all different ways for students to brainstorm for ideas: drawing webs, free-writing, clustering, even making collages. But whatever brainstorming method the student uses, he cannot start writing until he knows in what order his ideas should be put down. He needs an entrance point, an orderly plan that will tell him: *First explain this idea; then explain how this and this relate to it; then move on to this observation.* Without such a plan, he will either panic, or wildly set down ideas in random order.

The student's ability to plan out and use an outline will not reach maturity until the high-school years. The middle-grade years are training years—a period of time in which the student learns the skills of outline-making.

This skill has two parts. First, the student needs to learn the technical skill of outlining: the correct form.

I. MAIN POINT
  A. First supporting point
    1. Additional information about first supporting point
        a. Detail about that additional information

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B. Second supporting point
1. Additional information about that second supporting point
2. More additional information about that second supporting point
II. NEXT MAIN POINT
III. NEXT MAIN POINT

and so forth.

Second, the student needs plenty of experience in outline construction.

The narration exercises of Year One allowed the student to order ideas naturally—chronologically, or possibly by putting the most interesting ideas first. But in Year Two, the student must develop one of the central skills in critical thinking: ranking information in order of importance, and figuring out the relationship between different assertions.

Outlining trains the mind in this skill. The most important assertions are marked I, II, III; the information that directly relates to those assertions is marked A, B, C; the facts that relate to *those* points are marked 1, 2, 3, and so on.

A well-planned composition should be outlined. But before asking students to outline their own original ideas, the thoughtful teacher gives them plenty of practice in outlining *other* writing. Careful educators never ask a student to do a task which has not first been modeled; a beginner can't do something that he has never seen done.

So between fifth and eighth grade, the student practices outlining pages from history and science (never fiction, which follows different rules). This skill should be developed slowly and carefully. In fifth grade, the student learns to pick out the central idea in each paragraph: the I, II, III, IV (and so on). In sixth grade, he learns to pick out the central idea along with one or two supporting facts. In seventh and eighth grade, he learns to pick out the central idea, the supporting facts, and additional details about the supporting facts.

In the early stages, while the student is learning to outline, she will continue to practice writing narrative summaries, using this now-familiar form as a platform to practice sentence style and structure. But by sixth and seventh grade, the narrative summaries will give way to a more advanced form of writing: writing from an outline.

After making an outline of a passage, the student will put the original away and then rewrite the passage, using only the outline. Then she'll compare her assignment with the original. Again, this is preparation for mature high-school

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writing; before the student is given the task of coming up with an outline and writing from it, she needs to see how *other* writers flesh out the bones of an outline.

What You're Still Not Doing

Up to this point, the student has not been required to do a great deal of original writing (although many students may choose to do so). But the student is nevertheless doing an enormous amount of writing practice: every day from first grade on, she's been either copying, taking dictation, writing down narrations, outlining, or writing from someone else's outline.

All of this practice is necessary so that the student can come up to the high-school start line equipped and ready to go, prepared to launch into the full-fledged study of rhetoric.

It's important to resist the my-child's-writing-more-than-your-child pressure. Your neighbor's seventh grader may be doing a big research paper, while your seventh grader is still outlining and rewriting. Don't fret. Those research papers have been thrown at that seventh grader without a great deal of preparation. He's probably struggling to figure out exactly what he's doing, making false start after false start, and ending up with a paper which is largely rehashed encyclopedia information. I've taught scores of students who went through classroom programs which had them doing book reports, research papers, and other long assignments as early as third grade. This doesn't improve writing skill; it just produces students who can churn out a certain number of pages, when required.

As someone who's had to read those pages, I can testify that this approach is not, across the board, working.

A decent research paper requires skills in outlining and in persuasive writing that fifth, sixth, and seventh graders have not yet developed. Instead, in fifth through eighth grade, students should be writing constant short compositions, developing necessary skills before being required to carry those skills through into an extended piece of work. They will begin to learn the skills of researching, documentation, and argumentation, but the full exercise of these skills will not take place for several more years.

In summary: in the middle grades, students should learn to diagram, outline, and then write from an outline. This is essential preparation for the high-school stage—the full-fledged study of rhetoric.

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Writing with Style (Years 9–12)

In high school, the student—now fully equipped with the basic skills needed to produce an essay—begins to study rhetoric. He will use the tools of the *progymnasmata*, something which has almost fallen out of modern writing courses.

In ancient and medieval rhetoric, a certain set of exercises (beginning with such simple exercises as retelling a narrative in your own words, working up to more complex assignments such as proving an argument by supplying examples and analogies, or disproving an argument through reasoning) became standard among teachers of rhetoric. These exercises, known broadly as the progymnasmata ("preliminary exercises," because they preceded the mature exercise of rhetoric), were generally undertaken by older students, and in most cases young writers need a certain amount of time and maturity before they can benefit from the progymnasmata exercises. Now, however, students will begin original writing in earnest, and the progymnasmata exercises will give them the skills necessary to express their own ideas with grace and fluency.

The persuasive expression of ideas is the central focus in high-school writing. The ability to assert an opinion, and then to defend it with reason and rhetoric, is central to the teenager's sense of himself: until you know what you think and believe, and can explain *why* you believe it, you remain immature. "It is absurd," Aristotle declared, in his own treatise on rhetoric, "to hold that a man should be ashamed of inability to defend himself with his limbs, but not ashamed of an inability to defend himself with speech and reason; for the use of rational speech is more distinctive of a human being than the use of his limbs." In other words, articulate and persuasive speech is part of what *makes* us human.

So the rhetoric course should involve not just training in forms, but in words: What kinds of openings are best suited for different subjects? Is it more effective to write a series of short sentences, or several long ones with subordinated clauses? Should I appeal to analogy, use a metaphor, or avoid both? And many more considerations.

The Thesis Statement: Deciding What to Write About

Before the student can put the progymnasmata skills to work in writing, he must be able to come up with a thesis statement.

A thesis statement is a proposition you can defend, a statement you can prove or disprove, or an assertion that has to be supported by evidence. A thesis statement is not just a statement of fact. In most cases, the first topical statement

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a student comes up with when he decides to write is a statement of fact, not an assertion that can be proved.

> Homer and William Blake both talk about nature.
> Jane Austen's characters can't be open about their feelings.
> Hamlet had a fatal flaw.

All of these are statements of fact, not thesis statements. Yes, Homer and William Blake both talk about nature; this is an observation that can be proved true with a single glance at each. Yes, Jane Austen's characters can't be open about their feelings; this is right on the surface of every character interaction. Of course Hamlet had a fatal flaw; that's why he (and practically everyone else) dies. A paper that begins with a statement of fact can only go in one direction: listing examples, something which rapidly becomes very boring indeed.

There is, of course, a place for developing statements of fact: the traditional research paper. The high-school student will learn to produce these papers, but he'll find that college writing (and mature adult writing after education ends) tends to reward skills in persuasive writing—despite the fact that the research paper is often the capstone of high-school writing programs.

In order to write a persuasive composition, students need to be able to take that initial statement of fact and turn it into a thesis statement. Beginning thesis-writers can use three questions that will help guide them from the opening statement towards the formulation of a thesis.

The first question: How are these things the same, and how are they different? Blake and Homer both talk about nature, which is the obvious similarity between the two. But what's the difference? *Homer sees nature as a hostile force to be reckoned with while Blake sees nature as a friend of man.* This assumes the fact (that they both talk about nature) but then makes an assertion about it: the two men treat nature differently. This kind of paper—the comparison/contrast paper—is often the best place for a beginner to start.

The second question: Why? In *Pride and Prejudice*, Elizabeth *pretends to conceal her feelings, but she actually reveals them to Mr. Darcy in many subtle ways*. It's a given that Elizabeth can't be open about her feelings, the question is *why*? In her case, she is restricted by the polite society around her, forced to find more indirect ways of showing her emotions.

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The third question: When? *Hamlet is sane throughout most of the play, but goes mad during the duel.* This assertion argues that there's a transition point in the play where Hamlet moves into insanity—something that the writer will now have to prove by analyzing Hamlet's speeches and actions.

The Progymnasmata: Techniques of Persuasion

The high-school years are the time for students to study the techniques of effective persuasion. During Years Nine through Twelve, the high-school student will progress through a systematic study of the progymnasmata: among other skills, these teach writing a variety of narratives (condensed, amplified, biographical, and more), using different modes of narrative (direct, indirect, interrogative, comparative), mastering the art of description, learning how to use such sentence-level strategies as parallelism, parataxis, and multiple coordination, supporting arguments through reasoning and anecdote, using dialogue, and much more.

As part of the progymnasmata exercises, the student will analyze different kinds of writing, outlining them and becoming familiar with their forms. This will involve some rewriting from outlines, as in the middle grades, but the purpose of *this* rewriting is not to learn how to outline, but rather to develop knowledge of different styles and methods of argumentation.

Constant Short Papers

Throughout the high-school years, as he works through the progymnasmata, the student should write three to five one-page papers per week, taking his topics from literature, history, science, and his other high-school courses. Every time the student has to complete a one-page paper, he has to go through the process of formulating a thesis statement, deciding on a form and a strategy, constructing an outline, and writing from it. This constant repetition is much more valuable than two or three long writing projects undertaken over the course of the year.

In the last two years of high school, students should *also* pursue those longer projects, completing at least two lengthy research-style papers on a topic of their own choosing. These longer papers make use of the skills developed by the short papers, and also stretch the student towards a more detailed and complex form.

Rather than rushing to push children into more mature tasks, the twelve-level progression I've outlined takes the time and trouble to *prepare* students for writing. The goal is to turn the young writer into a thoughtful student who can *make use* of written language, rather than struggle with it.

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