

# CLASSROOM NOTES

*Plus*

A QUARTERLY OF TEACHING IDEAS

OCTOBER 2009

Are you ready to write and revise spontaneously in front of your students? The first lesson in this issue shows you how—and the author says it will change your students' views about writing forever. Here you'll also find meaningful approaches to discussion, activities to engage students with poetry, and a useful tool for recording and accessing information for research reports.

Your teaching ideas are always welcome. Email them to [notesplus@ncte.org](mailto:notesplus@ncte.org). Submission guidelines are available at [www.ncte.org/journals/cnp/write](http://www.ncte.org/journals/cnp/write).

## Writing Onstage: Giving Students an Authentic Model

by Beth L. Hewett

Rapt attention from students. Critical thinking about writing. Trust that the teacher understands their challenges. You can get all that—and more—from a one-week writing lesson that will change your students' views about writing forever. What will it take on your part? Just a sense of adventure, a little bit of courage, and a thick skin. Oh, and writing!

We've all written something for our students before even if it's only their assignments, tests, or responses to their essays. But how often have we written for our students in the same ways that we ask of them: somewhat spontaneously, with some brainstorming and drafting, and with the expectation of a critical response? Probably not often, if ever.

Forty years ago, Robert Zoellner imagined the benefits of a chalkboard that would wrap around the entire classroom; he pictured students writing out their ideas while talking about them, behaviorally enacting his "talk-write" theory. In 1969, his idea was pretty radical and it was much disputed among educators (and that quality makes his monograph interesting reading even today). I read Zoellner's monograph in 1979 during my first semester in graduate school for a master's program in composition, language, and literature. ("Talk-Write: A Behavioral Pedagogy for Composition," by Robert Zoellner. *College English* 30.4 [January 1969]: 267–320. The entire issue was devoted to Zoellner's monograph.)

What interested me the most about this piece—and has deeply affected my writing pedagogy—was Zoellner's dare to writing teachers to do what he perceived that instructors in other hands-on disciplines already did: model the act that is being taught:

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**Access handouts from the October 2009 CNP webpage at <http://www.ncte.org/journals/cnp/issues/v27-2>**

During my own K–12 years, during my undergraduate years, and during the fifteen years that I myself have taught English composition, I have seen English instructors deliver lectures on rhetorical principles such as unity, coherence, and emphasis; I have seen them comment on the textbooks which develop such principles; I have seen them analyze textbook readings and student themes in terms of such principles; I have seen them hand out mimeographed materials of their

own composing which illustrated such principles—but I have never, repeat never, seen a composition instructor, whether full professor or graduate student, walk into a composition classroom cold-turkey, with no preparation, ask the class for a specific theme-topic perhaps derived from a previous day's discussion and then—off the top of his head—actually compose a paragraph which illustrates the rhetorical principles that are the current concern of the class. The skiing instructor actually skis for his students; the pianist actually plays for his; the teacher of dance can occasionally be caught dancing. We English teachers, generally speaking, are different: as far as the students in our composition classes can see, we are very good at talking *about* writing, but we never write. (310–311)

Zoellner continues, “In short, we never model the scribal act” (311). Today, of course, teachers routinely demonstrate their writing; they blog and journal with students and share their own writing-in-progress with them in workshop settings.

However, do students actually get to watch the unrehearsed act of writing at the earliest stages of thinking and drafting? Zoellner says:

Moreover, the entire class ought to have many opportunities to observe the talk-write instructor modeling the scribal act, which is a very complex behavior, involving such motoric elements as phrasing, rephrasing, hesitating, vocalizing, erasing, striking out, recasting, and even actually *failing* on first venture into the writing situation so that an entirely fresh start has to be made. (311)

This dare was just too much for me to ignore. Since I was a graduate teaching assistant for first-year English students, I went to class the next day prepared to write spontaneously for them. I had my students give me their ideas for topics, wrote a paragraph on the chalkboard about one of those

topics, and the lesson launched itself from there. I don't remember that first paragraph's topic, but I've never forgotten my students' intense interest. And students seem to have that interest whether my writing of the day is strong or poor.

The lesson plan shared here emerged that day in class and has been refined as I've taught with it about a hundred times—and it's always fresh. It works for middle and high school students, as well as college students.

## Lesson Outline

*Time needed:* three to five 40- to 60-minute sessions for middle school or high school; two to three 50-minute sessions for college students.

*Session 1:* teacher writes from student-offered topics and students watch, take notes. Post-writing discussion about writing behaviors, strategies, and possible revisions.

*Session 2:* Teacher reviews original paragraph/essay and presents revision for explanation, advice, and discussion.

*Session 3:* Teacher gives students hard copy of “zero draft,” preliminary draft, initial revision, and presentation draft. Review of lessons that emerge from teacher writing and revision.

*Session 4, if desired:* Students write from student- and teacher-offered topics. Writing is shared for feedback.

*Session 5, if desired:* Students bring to class the zero draft, preliminary draft, and initial revision. Write/type presentation draft to hand in together. Debrief with discussion or journal entry about what students have learned about experienced writers and their own writing.

*Materials:* Computer/projector combination OR clean whiteboard OR chalkboard (need class secretary for this option)

## CLASSROOM NOTES *Plus*

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Volume 27, Number 2 (October 2009)

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*CLASSROOM NOTES PLUS* (ISSN 1526-5641) is published four times a year, in January, April, August, and October, by the National Council of Teachers of English, 1111 W. Kenyon Road, Urbana, IL 61801-1096. Annual membership in NCTE is \$40 for individuals, and a member subscription to CNP is \$20.00. Single copy: \$10 (member price \$5). Remittances should be made payable to NCTE by credit card, or by check, money order, or bank draft in U.S. currency. Orders can also be placed toll free at (877) 369-6283 or online at [www.ncte.org](http://www.ncte.org). Communications regarding orders, subscriptions, single copies, or change of address should be addressed to *CLASSROOM NOTES PLUS*, 1111 W. Kenyon Road, Urbana, IL 61801-1096. Communications regarding permission to reprint should be addressed to Permissions, NCTE, 1111 W. Kenyon Road, Urbana, IL 61801-1096. Communications regarding advertising should be addressed to Carrie Stewart, NCTE, 1111 W. Kenyon Road, Urbana, IL 61801-1096. POSTMASTER: Send address changes to *CLASSROOM NOTES PLUS*, 1111 W. Kenyon Road, Urbana, IL 61801-1096. Periodical postage paid at Urbana, Illinois, and at additional mailing offices.

## Session 1

Prepare students for the lesson by telling them that you are reversing roles with them. You're about to write for them and they'll be your readers who offer you observations and advice. Ask them why they think you're doing this lesson and to predict what they'll get out of it. If you have space, write down some of their thoughts to review with them later. Explain that they get to offer you possible topics, but you get the final choice for your paragraph. Tell them that they'll watch you brainstorm some initial ideas—called a “zero” draft, which isn't usually available for others to view, but which will help them to see how you think when you write.

After listing about 8–10 ideas, writing down even the silly or impossible ones, choose which one you'll write about. (My favorite topic remains the comparison/contrast essay I wrote about drinking straws because I really had to think cleverly about that topic.)

### Sample Topic List

- Making a peanut butter sandwich
- Writing a poem
- Your dog's favorite toy
- Why we have wars
- How pretty butterflies are
- Your choice of laundry detergent
- What you like about teaching

Jot down some ideas about the topic you've chosen. It doesn't have to be a lot of ideas, just some thoughts that readily come to mind and that you may or may not use in your writing. These jottings are your zero draft, and they can be very short or much longer.

### Zero Draft

- Butterflies, colors, cocoons
- Death and rebirth
- Losing loved ones
- Celebrating life
- Plastic, stained glass, paper, and light
- Dad and George

At this point, you can ask students to take notes on what you're doing as you write. You can talk out your writing or write silently. I'm a silent writer for the most part, too busy thinking to tell students what I'm doing at the time. Since my writing takes only about 20 minutes typed or 30 minutes handwritten, I use time later to recap my activities.

Plan on writing a fairly full paragraph—one with a clear topic sentence, several main points with detailed explanatory material, and a concluding sentence or two. Often, these paragraphs provide fodder for 5–6 paragraph essays.

## Preliminary Draft

In this particular paragraph (see Figure 1, page 4), I found myself adding some words and phrases (shown in blue), deleting others (shown with strikethrough), and correcting a few obvious misspellings as I wrote. I wanted students to see that some part of my mind continued to dwell on what I had already written even while I was writing something new. I also wanted them to see that I kept going despite hesitations at certain ideas, words, phrases, or sentences. Finally, I highlighted my topic sentence using a double underline.

Typically, after I finish writing, hands go up from the students, but I don't respond to them yet. Instead, I read the piece aloud—twice.

The first time, I read audibly, but softly as if I am in a private reading place. At that point, I make a few more rough connections in the text, such as “(What was their time anyway?)” as issues for me to address in revision.

Then, I read it a second time, meeting my students' eyes and clearly showing that my reading is for them. In this way, I model reading aloud to myself and then to others, which are helpful editing and proofreading skills.

If students seem to hesitate to offer some critical comments, I guide them. First, I say a few things that I like about my paragraph at this stage. I say something about why I chose the topic I did. In the case of this example, I explained that I know death is a difficult subject, but it naturally connected with butterflies for me and it seemed like the most meaningful topic to write about for them. I told them that since we all have had losses, I felt safe sharing mine with them.

Then, I separated this part of the talk with a significant pause and explained what I didn't like very much about the paragraph.

When invited to tell me what they think, students tend to model my thoughtful yet open stance about the writing. They usually say positive things as well as more critical things about what I could change in revision. After a few brave students say something that they don't like, other students tend to open up with suggestions for how I could improve my writing. I accept any and all feedback as valid, jotting down what I can quickly.

As the lesson ends, I remind students to complete their notes about what they saw during this lesson and to bring that back the next class day. I promised to revise the piece that night and bring it back for their review.

## Session 2

In the revised draft (see Figure 2, p. 5) I show students what tracked changes look like. Many contemporary stu-



### Preliminary Draft

Butterflies used to mean nothing to me. That is, they meant nothing more than an insect that spends weeks or months (I don't know how long) in a cocoon until it springs forth from its fragile shell to become a pretty, colorful, flying insect. Butterflies are beautiful and I've never tried to capture one. It **They** seemed too pretty to pester and I really just liked watching them fly around. But now, butterflies have added meaning for me. They mean death, or maybe it is *life* from death. **[too abrupt???** In July **July** of 2000, my older brother **George** was killed in a small airplane crash. In December of 2001, my father died of a massive coronary, not 6 weeks after his **95-year-old** mother finally had died; **she had suffered from Alzheimer's disease for more than fifteen years.** My brother was 44 and my father 65—both dead before their “time.” **(What was their time, anyway?)** It was after my brother's **George's** death that I learned that butterflies have an additional meaning to many grieving people—that of rebirth from death. **Shortly after his death, my** My mother and father each made a butterfly in George's memory (can you imagine my big, strapping father cutting a butterfly from construction paper and then coloring it with colored pens and sprinkling it with sparkles?). The butterflies went to the national conference of Compassionate Friends, a support group for grieving parents. Now, I see butterflies everywhere. My mother has **a cut paper** one in her living room and **two plastic butterflies that fly attached to stakes** in her garden, which is kind of a memorial to both my father and brother. I bought a stained-glass butterfly at the Renaissance Fair to hang on my window in my kitchen. And, of course, they appear in a ~~profusion~~ **profusion** of colors in my garden. I admire ~~them~~ **them**, watch them, and still don't quite know why they're a symbol of death and rebirth. But I also look for them and their presence comforts me.

Figure 1: Preliminary Draft

### Revised Draft

Until recently, butterflies ~~didn't have any special meaning for me. They used to mean nothing to me. That is, they meant nothing more than an insect~~ were just insects that ~~spends weeks or months (I don't know how long) in a develop and grow in cocoons~~ until ~~it~~ they ~~spring forth from its escape their fragile nurseries shell~~ to become ~~a pretty, colorful~~ flying insects ~~with four beautifully colored wings~~. Butterflies ~~are beautiful and I've never tried to capture one. It always seemed too so pretty to pester,~~ and I really just liked watching them fly, ~~so I never tried to capture one. I remember a saying from something I read or saw: "Butterflies are free." around. But now, Now, however,~~ butterflies have added meaning for me. They're not simply free; they also ~~They mean symbolize death, or maybe it is life~~ from death. ~~Death hit me quickly and it hit hard. In In July July~~ of 2000, my older brother George was killed in a small ~~airplane crash and broke my heart. In October, 2001, my 95-year old grandmother finally passed on from the ravages of Alzheimer's disease; her death seemed a blessed release. Then,~~ In December of 2001, my father unexpectedly died of a massive coronary, ~~and I didn't think I could ever sleep again without death disturbing my dreams. Forty days after Dad died, so did his business partner. And then, in July of this year, my mother-in-law's death released her from both Alzheimer's and Parkinson's diseases, another painful blessing. Death has become a regular acquaintance, if not my friend, and not 6 weeks after his 95-year old mother finally had died. My brother was 44 and my father 65—both dead before their "time."~~ Butterflies have become symbolic. It was after my brother's ~~George's~~ death that I learned that butterflies have an additional meaning to many grieving people—that of rebirth from death. ~~Because they go to cocoons as caterpillars—sleeping, becoming—and they spring forth as beautiful creatures, somehow they give hope to we who grieve that our loved ones also will be reborn to a new life. Shortly after his death, My mother and father each made a butterfly in George's memory to send to the national conference of Compassionate Friends, a support group for grieving parents. I could hardly (can you imagine my big, strapping logical father cutting a butterfly from construction paper and then coloring it with colored pens and sprinkling it with sparkles?); but honoring his first born child meant enough to him that his tender side took over. The butterflies went to the national conference of Compassionate Friends, a support group for grieving parents. Butterflies seem to be everywhere now, since death has invaded my life. Now, I see butterflies everywhere. In her living room, mMy mother has the construction paper one that my father made (returned to her from Compassionate Friends). In her garden, two plastic butterflies in her garden, which is kind of a memorialize to both my father and brother. In my own kitchen window, bought a stained-glass butterfly at the Renaissance Fair to hang on my window in my kitchen reminds me of the promise of life. And, of course, they butterflies dart about appear in my garden, live and free, in a profusion profusely of colorfults in my garden. I admire enjoy watching them, watch them, and now I think I understand a little why they symbolize life from death. When a loved one passes on, it is the hope of new life that sustains us; butterflies have experienced that new life from the cocoon of deep, deep sleep.~~

Figure 2: Revised Draft

dents type their work, but they often don't know how to use the tools that will help them to do the kind of revision I'd like them to learn. Whether I use a handout version of the original handwritten piece and its revision or a version typed into the original document, I try to show how tracking changes helps writers to see what they're doing and think about whether they want to revert to the original format or to accept the changes.

Whenever possible, I point out these tools on computers where they're working and give them a minute to find them and experiment.

When I read the piece aloud this time, I read it with my own interruptions as I explain why I made the changes I did. For example, in this paragraph about butterflies, I found that I deleted some of the original paragraph and added a good bit to it—in part because I wanted to talk about death more philosophically than I had begun doing and in part because I wanted to use deeper detail in the writing.

I typically use as many of my students' suggestions as make sense with respect to where I want the paragraph to go. Doing so enables me to talk about how to choose among the comments they might receive on their writing. With this lesson, students often comprehend for the first time that when they make one revision choice, it engenders more and different choices from those that would emerge from listening to different feedback. In short, students learn something about responsible authorship when they understand how writing develops in response to thoughtful change.

After I read the piece aloud and make my explanations, I ask a student to read it again for me so I can listen and make any final notations. Often we'll find issues that I haven't yet seen or someone will have an additional thought for me as writer.

We end the session with my promise to give them a final piece the next class day. I explain that I call it my "presentation draft" because it may not feel completely finished to me, but I know I have to give them a paragraph that represents my best efforts so far. (See a sample presentation draft on the October 2009 CNP web page at <http://www.ncte.org/journals/cnp/issues/v27-2>).

I explain that I will accept all changes that seem right based on the day's work with them, correct any grammar and mechanics errors, and will save the document without track changes. This presentation draft is like me deciding to wear nice shoes to the prom with my gown rather than my torn-up athletic shoes. If there is any class time left, I give students the opportunity to work on revisions of their own pieces.

### Session 3

In this session, I provide students with hard copies of my zero draft, preliminary draft, revised draft, and presentation draft. These are marked up using computer tools and/or my own notes. By now, they understand my way of making notes on my own writing and can use the notes as a model for their own work, but they can ask any questions they have. I thank them for their help in making my presentation draft as strong as it has gotten to this point. Then we review some of the lessons that have come from this series of exercises:

- Experienced writers have similar challenges as novice writers (e.g., being blocked or stuck, moving beyond problems, imperfect writing, and not enough time).
- Most writers benefit from topic selection, brainstorming, initial drafting, revising, and perfecting the piece.
- Everyone needs experience using revision and editing tools.
- Sometimes there is potential for longer essays in short paragraphs.
- We should seek, accept, choose among, and use feedback thoughtfully.
- It's necessary to let go of a carefully written, but imperfect piece of writing (and this is different from handing in a preliminary draft and expecting it to be strong).

### Sessions 4 and 5

If desired, Session 3 can be followed with one or two additional sessions, which give students the opportunity to practice what they've learned. In these, students write from student- and teacher-offered topics and share their writings for feedback. Students may also be asked to bring to class the zero draft, preliminary draft, initial revision, and written or typed presentation draft to hand in together. Discussion and journal entries can be used to help students debrief about what they have learned.

When we write with students, *they benefit*. But when we write spontaneously for them and turn them into our readers, *we all benefit*. We validate ourselves as teachers and writers in students' eyes, and together we can create writing—whether strong or weak—in which we all invest our attention, thinking, and trust.

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