

AN OPEN LETTER TO THE STUDENT

by
Robert H. Rempe

[Editor's Note: To explain to his high school students the importance of writing process, Robert Rempe gives them the following letter. Students who follow his process approach would fulfill SOLs related to (1) generating, gathering, planning, and organizing ideas, (2) elaborating ideas, (3) critiquing peer writing and making suggestions for improvement, (4) revising writing for clarity and content, and (5) proofreading and preparing final products for the intended audience and purpose.]

One learns to write by writing, and even more by rewriting. Often students say they wish that they "knew how" to write so that it would be easier. Unfortunately this is a mistaken notion. The best writers are those who work hardest at it. No writing teacher or text can give you a magic formula or shortcut to writing. What we can do is help you think more consciously and carefully about the writing process by guiding you through it.

Drafting and revision are keys to the process. The workshop method recognizes that writing is a way of thinking and that what a writer puts on paper is not engraved in stone. A draft is a trial. It makes vague thoughts concrete and enables the writer to see what has to be done next. Professional writers in all fields draft and revise. Becoming more experienced at writing does not mean that one learns to write perfectly on the first try. It means that one learns how to evaluate and "fix up" drafts and use "prewriting" time to stimulate thought, which will make all drafts more interesting. The activities and discussions in this course will help you produce useful drafts and then evaluate them to turn out a product you will like.

I do not mean to say that everyone will need the same number of drafts or even that one writer will go through the same process with each paper. Different writers work in different ways; different assignments call for different processes. I do mean to say that thinking and rethinking, trying and rejecting, and trying again will make the task easier and more satisfying.

In all stages of the process your teacher and hopefully your peers will help you to evaluate your drafts and think through your revisions. Your teacher will be able to get to the problem in your drafts quickly and make suggestions to improve them. But do not overlook the help you can get from your peers. Your teacher is only one reader. When you write, you want to communicate your ideas, and the more readers who give you their responses, the better idea you will have about whether you are communicating effectively. Then, too, your peers are struggling with the same writing you are, and their problems and solutions to problems may help you. Ultimately, however, the writing, and the responsibility, is yours.

The first question you must answer about your writing is this: will it be interesting enough to hold the attention of the reader? You are the only one who can make sure that the answer is "yes," because your ideas will shape the paper, and your experiences and knowledge will bring it to life. Make your readers understand, and convince them that your paper is worth their time from the first.

The first step in the process is thinking and gathering material and ideas. Each assignment has a pre-drafting and planning section to help you with that. Sometimes that involves recalling, sometimes it requires reading and other kinds of data collection. Every writer uses this time differently. Some may want to start drafting much earlier than others. Some begin writing, but the writing is a form of thinking rather than a draft as such.

When you have finished a draft that you think merits consideration from others, your instructor will ask you to share it with other writers, who will also be sharing their drafts with you. As a member of such a group, your purpose is not to tell someone what is "wrong" with a paper, but to respond as an intelligent reader, telling where the paper works for you and where you are confused or lose interest or want to hear more. Sometimes you will be asked to respond to particular questions; at other times you will give unstructured responses. The purpose of writing groups is to give guidance for revisions. Sometimes responses from group members will be the only reaction the writer will get before preparing a final copy. You want to be as helpful as possible.

Because different writers write differently, you should expect the drafts you see and hear in group sessions, and your own drafts for different assignments, to be in different stages of completion. Sometimes the drafts you or a colleague brings to the group will be ready for final polish. Sometimes the drafts will be in need of serious revision. But when you bring a draft for consideration by others, you should be at a point where you can profit from the reactions of other readers. You should try to learn to be an objective reader of what you write.

Often your instructor will read your drafts and talk to you about them. Again the purpose is to aid you in revision, not to tell you what is "wrong" with the paper. You should be prepared to talk to the teacher, explaining what you are trying to do, asking for help where you have difficulties, rather than just sitting passively. The paper is yours. Ultimately its success depends on you.

When you have received feedback from your group and your teacher, you should prepare the next draft. Different drafts will require different kinds of work at this point. Some will require only polishing of the language. This we call editing. Often, however, a draft will require major work like reorganizing to make ideas clearer or rethinking will be needed to recall more details. This we call revision. Revision requires more than "fixing up" a few sentences. The word itself means "re-seeing." If your paper is not communicating your ideas or experiences, you need to "see it again" in terms of structure or content.

Once you have revised, you must edit, checking sentences for clarity, effectiveness, efficiency, and correctness. If you have trouble correcting grammar, spelling, or punctuation, you should consult a handbook and a dictionary or ask the teacher for help.

A piece of writing can never be considered a final draft until you have paid attention to its sentences, and you should never hand in a paper until you have gone through it at least once doing nothing but that.

Writing well is hard work. It requires serious effort, but it gives serious returns. And the task is never really finished. Each new piece of writing presents a new challenge. Don't be discouraged because your writing is not as good as someone else's. If you were an experienced writer already, you would not need this course. The idea is to start where you are and make progress from that point. No one can promise that after one semester you will have mastered the art of writing. But I can assure you that if you stick to the course and do all the work required -- not only by the teacher but also by your own sense of accomplishment and pride -- you will be a better writer at the end of the course than you are now.