

Introduction

This book represents twenty five years' teaching English/Language Arts in California. Some of you may remember the CAP test? In one sense, this book began way back then, in the eighties. Like you, as we faced new challenges in the classroom, we created materials to supplement published ones. Like you, we cast about for effective ways to address an ever-changing and ever-increasing list of curricular goals. CAP was a "high-stakes test." Scores were published, and schools scrambled to get them up. It was during one such scramble that Sheri came up with the idea of color-mapping; we include a refined version of that idea in section one of this binder. It was also during this time that we came to appreciate the value of a well-constructed scoring guide; those included here have been completely aligned with each standard and with the "official" California State Department of Education (CDE) guides. However, ours have been reorganized and expanded for teaching clarity. During CAP testing we teachers were fortunate in that the CDE produced a series of well-written documents outlining the requirements of each writing style and providing model essays with commentary to illustrate those requirements. We found those helpful and, in the absence of similar materials today, we offer you our own version. Then came CLAS, with its greatly expanded requirements. We observed how helpful the graphic organizers and the group work were to our students. You'll find versions of them here. We are indebted to Spencer Kagan for the suggestion to add the Peer Response Sheets found at the end of each section. Spence offered some much-needed inservice on cooperative learning when his son Carlos was one of our students. In the course of that dialogue, the peer response sheets were born. Today we find ourselves addressing STAR: high stakes testing once again, but without the "safety net" that those CDE CAP documents provided. We hope that this binder will begin to fill that gap with useful tools for new teachers and veterans alike.

This binder does *not* address writing at the sentence and paragraph levels. The California Writing Projects and a plethora of textbooks do that beautifully. Instead, we offer resources that we ourselves have not been able to find in print: efficient, practical tools to help our students make sense of "the big picture." As teachers, we want to help our students become flexible writers, capable of competent on-demand writing in a number of styles. However, as a long range goal, we also hope to help them grasp the underlying similarities which unite all good prose. We hope to give them the sense of a structure upon which they may build their arguments and find them sound, not merely for a single assignment or high stakes test, but for a lifetime.

In choosing the model essays, particularly the score level 4 models, we have looked for those which step "outside the box," those which require us to see beyond standard form in favor of substance. Robert Atwan in his "Foreword" to *The Best American Essays of 1998* offers this challenge to the English teacher:

I've grown so accustomed to being asked what makes a good essay that I was taken by surprise recently when someone asked me what I considered a poor essay.

Years ago, when I was instructing college freshmen in the humble craft of writing essays-- or "themes," as we called them--I noticed that many students had already been taught how to manufacture the Perfect Theme. It began with an introductory paragraph that contained a "thesis statement" and often cited someone named Webster; it then pursued its expository path through three paragraphs that "developed the main idea" until it finally reached a "concluding" paragraph that diligently summarized all three previous paragraphs. The conclusion usually began, "Thus we see that" If the theme told a personal story, it usually concluded with the narrative cliché, "Suddenly I realized that...." Epiphanies abounded.

What was especially maddening about the typical five-paragraph theme had less to do with its tedious structure than with its implicit message that writing should be the end product of thought and not the enactment of its process. My students seemed unaware

that writing could be an act of discovery, an opportunity to say something they had never before thought of saying. The worst themes were largely the products of premature conclusions, of unearned assurances, of minds made up. As Robert Frost once put it, for many people thinking merely means voting. Why go through the trouble of writing papers on an issue when all that's required is an opinion poll? So perhaps it did make more sense to call these productions themes and not essays, since what was being written had almost no connection with the original sense of "essaying"--trying out ideas and attitudes, writing out of a condition of uncertainty, of not-knowing. "Sleep lingers all our lifetime about our eyes," says Emerson, "as night hovers all day in the boughs of the fir-tree."

The five-paragraph theme was also a charade. It not only paraded relentlessly to its conclusion, it began with its conclusion. It was all about its conclusion. Its structure permitted no change of direction, no reconsideration, no wrestling with ideas. It was--and still is--the perfect vehicle for the sort of reader who likes to ask: "And your point is?"

We ourselves read this essay with some chagrin, having asked the question, "And your point is...." more times than we can count when responding to student work. Further, a casual observer might comment that this binder promulgates the kind of writing Atwan rightly decries. We see it this way: While the most gifted of writers will find "the box" an encumbrance, many others will find it possible to step outside that box only when they possess a firm vision of its dimensions. Then there is the infelicitous truth that some individuals need the box. We are not all gifted with words, but we must all use them to the best effect we can muster when faced with a need to communicate. As long as we teachers expect ourselves to prepare them all, the box will necessary for some.

However, we include Robert Atwan's comments for the simple -- and vast -- reason that, in this era of scoring guides and standards and on-demand testing, he causes us to think twice. He reminds us that there is a child behind each essay. He challenges us to question, for example, whether the lack of a correctly structured thesis should throw an otherwise brilliant essay into the score 3 level. If the thought content is structurally complex and layered throughout a piece, then is this not sufficient? We hope so.

We close with these comments from a talk given by Tillie Olsen as quoted in *SLEEPING WITH ONE EYE OPEN -- Women Writers and the Art of Survival* :

The book *Memoirs of a Working Woman's Guild*, for which Virginia Woolf wrote the preface, was written by women who were not at home with the pen at all. Few of them had even sixth-grade education and how stiff they were with that written word! Virginia Woolf was a member of the Working Women's Guild, got them speakers every month for three years, attended meetings faithfully, was fascinated, moved, instructed by these women. But she had to conceal her respect, affection, esteem for them with her posh friends, cover over by being amusing, about them, about her participation. Even with closest friends, if it's a sex/class/color world, you have to dissemble sometimes, cover-up.

But Virginia Woolf was handed these life stories that these women had been asked by their Guilds to write. The women were selected by their own Guilds because it seemed that their lives spoke best for the rest of them. Virginia Woolf agonized in her notebooks: "Is this a book? How can this be a book?" These were not literature as literature is usually defined. The only "literary" quality about them was a writer's selection of significant detail. The problem of "standards" again. But Virginia Woolf decided to write the preface, which she ends by making one of the most important statements and guides for us: "Whether this is literature, or whether it is not literature, I will not presume to say, but that it explains much and tells much, that is certain." And this, too, is part of the greatness of literature.

The problem of "standards." The problem of finding a point of departure that leads to substance rather than seeking a hollow destination in form. The problem of properly acknowledging the power of that which "explains much and tells much." It is left to each teacher to find the means into such a journey, one which *does* permit change, wrestling with ideas, reconsideration, a journey which *is* the enactment of thought and which may lead to a new definition of literature for those who claim the freedom to challenge unexamined assumptions, their own and those of others.

In publishing these materials, we hope to offer you and your students a point of departure in your journey toward finding a point of departure. Do you find this a radical notion? Let the good times roll.

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