

Reflections and Possibilities: The One-and-Done Senior Paper

Ann Ellsworth and Beth Kennedy

It is March and the looming deadline for the dreaded senior paper creates a palpable tension in the Roberts (pseudonym) household. The assignment is standard-fare—a typical assignment from Any High School in Any Town, USA.

Present the pros and cons of a controversial issue, provide evidence from multiple sources, and integrate the writer's position that reflects taking a moral position.

Dad and Seth are at the kitchen table, but it is not a casual father-son conversation. Holding a two-page draft and exuding an attitude of “let’s-get-this-over-with-and-the-sooner-the-better,” the boy is a picture of resentment. With long legs thrust under the table, arms folded across his chest, and a sullen expression on his freckled face, he is hardly the poster child for an engaged student. Exasperated, Dad rakes fingers through his hair and paces back and forth, wondering to himself, “Why didn’t Seth start working on the paper before now? Why can’t he write, for pity’s sake? How am I ever going to help him?”

Instead, he asks, “Is this all you have? Come on, you knew this assignment was coming. Now it’s due in a mere 48 hours and you show me this pathetic

start? For pity's sake, Son, you're going to be graduating in a couple of months, and you've got to step up to the plate here. You've got to take responsibility. Initiative, you know? You do it at Arby's when you are scheduled to close. What gives?"

Seth mumbles. The project is overwhelming. He is not "into" the assignment. He just does not care. There are other things on his mind. A classic case of writer's block.

As the situation rapidly deteriorates, Dad calls his sister, who is taking a graduate-level writing improvement class as part of her master's coursework. The two talk regularly and though separated by distance, are close. He recalls one recent conversation when Beth animatedly chattered about her class, the real-world writing experiences they are confronted with, the development of the notion that writing is a process rather than a one-shot effort, and the usefulness of exemplars to model strong prose and clarity of expression. Now he dials her number, hoping she picks up—and that she has a solution.

Dad does not mince words. "We need help, Beth," he says with a significant look in Seth's direction. "Seth's got this big paper due in just a couple of days, and he doesn't have much written. In reading it over, I'm at a loss and don't know how to direct him."

Decisions Determine Direction

This vignette is not a fabrication. Sadly, it is one repeated in numerous households. If we dial in and look more critically at the context, we can be more compassionate than judgmental. Quite honestly, Seth's approach is not atypical of most high schoolers. Students procrastinate, especially when they are uncertain and unmotivated. Seth wants to be one and done with the project. But such an approach is counter to the writing process that involves contemplating the topic, recording initial ideas, assembling resources, getting a running start, and then revisiting the draft to rework, revise, and refine. Such an assignment demands a multi-step and well-orchestrated process and requires several passes; single drafts are insufficient. In our story, other pressures have coalesced to complicate the situation. Seth, talented in baseball, is in contention for college scholarships. At the height of scouting season, recruiters are on the look-out for the next star outfielder; consequently, Seth's focus is on baseball practices and games more than his senior paper. With time as a finite resource, Seth has prioritized.

Dad's reaction, a volatile cocktail of exasperation, frustration, and helplessness, is typical, too. Feeling frustrated and guilty because he lost his temper, Dad is loath to admit that he sees his son's performance as a reflection of himself and his parenting. For him, the senior paper is much like the middle

school science fair project for his younger son. As a well-meaning parent, he fights the temptation to take over and do the project, but he knows it will be compared to everyone else's. Unlike his father, Seth is not invested and shrugs off the urgency. Reminding her brother that the relationship matters, Beth asks him, "In ten years, what will Seth remember? The paper or the angry words?"

How do we teachers support parents and do what is in the best interest of students to forestall these sorts of situations? How does a teacher help students appreciate the reward to be had from creating worthwhile writing? Kelly Gallagher (2002) observes, "Ask Julia Child why she cooks or Yo-Yo Ma why he plays the cello?" (p. 2) Comparing Seth and his senior project to a preeminent French chef and her artistry is a leap, to be sure. But parallels can be drawn. The chef strives to create a culinary delight from ordinary ingredients. So, too, the writer seeks to produce something that is worthwhile from the mere words within his grasp. Helping students to experience the satisfaction of writing is the teacher's Herculean task. We know students bring a wide range of literacy skills and attitudes to our classrooms, and in a short 180 school days, we strive to develop their writing voices. This profound responsibility to make all students feel like writers and to help them become writers is daunting. Fortunately, parents

can play a supporting role. Even though they may not feel qualified to give specific feedback, they can offer vital emotional support.

What Able Writers Do

All students are writers, yet not all students have discovered their writers' voice. Zinsler (1988) observes that "Writing is not just a special language that belongs to English teachers and few other sensitive souls who have a 'fit for words'. Writing is the logical arrangement of thought" (p. 11). Many have posited that students bring uneven and disparate writing experiences; thus, it is not surprising that many of them do not write well (de Onis, 2009; Gallagher, 2011; Proseke & Kapp, 2013). Fortunately, a major shift in teachers' understanding of the writing process and the objectives of writing instruction—that "it is a social process and that the writer can learn about a particular subject from writing about it" can help students learn about themselves as they experience the process (Ryder & Graves, 1994, p. 253).

Writers are committed and invested in their topic; they have something to say to their audience. However, Seth, lacking commitment and direction, picked what he considered to be an "easy" topic. Without a roadmap in place, his haphazard attempts meandered aimlessly. For him, writing was perfunctory and the grade was an empty motivator. When Dad read his son's draft, he

encountered ideas that were shallow, underdeveloped, and unconvincing. Like a fly going from plate to plate at a picnic, the Seth's sentences were random and stilted. Instead of constructing a graceful and cascading waterfall of ideas, purposeful and powerful, Seth's writing left his dad unconvinced and confused.

Capable writers, understanding their purpose, keep their audience in focus. Developing ideas and communicating effectively is their mission. To write with authority, they tap into prior knowledge, think about what they already know, and then add to this cache. As information is gathered, they cluster ideas and impose order on the assemblage of information. The resulting draft reflects a logical arrangement of thought. Furthermore, competent writers know how to revise the draft for meaning and coherence. They add words and sentences, make substitutions and deletions, and move text around to communicate more effectively. Finally, they attend to mechanical correctness, generally postponing this until the end (Tompkins, 1994, p. 73).

To help students develop coherent compositions, writing teachers make the steps explicit by modeling skill and strategy use, and taking advantage of teachable moments (Tompkins, 1994, p. 79). Teachers understand that even high school seniors need guidance. They eschew the assign-and-evaluate approach; instead, such teachers might model possible responses to the assignment in bite-

size pieces. Rather than exhort students to “make the introduction engaging,” they contrast two introductions: One insipid and uninspired; the other compelling and stirring. Of course, students know the closing paragraph needs to revisit key ideas postulated in the opening portion of the paper. Nevertheless, the wise teacher doesn’t assume that all seventeen-year-olds can deliver; instead, she invites students to critique two examples, comparing relative strengths and weaknesses of a well-written and an inferior concluding paragraph. Knowing that skilled writers have absorbed structures, techniques and language used by others, the consummate teacher finds models to share so students learn from the best. Modeling is one of the most powerful techniques to advance writers’ skills.

Conclusion

Teachers recognize that preparing students for tomorrow’s college and career readiness standards requires in-depth and ongoing instruction. The how, or the skills, along with the what, or the content, are synergistic and interconnected pieces of the writing process. Students need to know about the topic, and they need to know how to write. Deepening writing instruction by modeling how writers think before and during the process is the roadmap that helps students, like Seth, to discover that they can learn more, write better, *and* write more expressively.

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