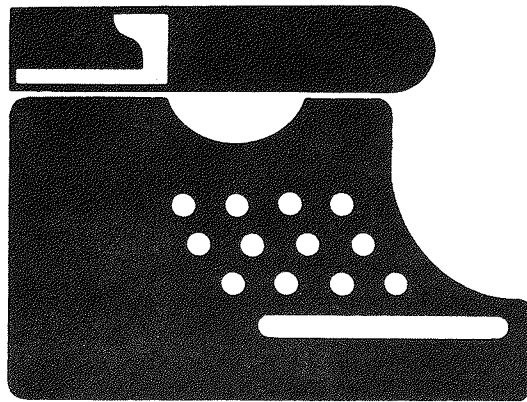
Teachers & Writers



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Imitation Hemingway

Making Literary Analysis Fun for Students

by Joyce Coyne Dyer

I BEGAN GETTING THE IDEA FOR A WRITING assignment when I heard some of my high school sophomores laughingly greet each other one day with this line from Hemingway's "Big Two-Hearted River": "I like to open cans." Although *The Nick Adams Stories* always proves to be one of the best-liked volumes I teach all year (and certainly one of the best tools to develop critical reading skills), students, about mid-way through the collection, begin to see, with a smile, the potential for humor in Hemingway's repeated patterns and in the trademark conventions of his style.

Their impulse to chuckle at Hemingway now and then, however, in no sense diminished their respect for him or their enjoyment of his appealing, well-crafted prose. On the contrary, it made them far better readers than they might have been otherwise. For parody can also be a pleasurable form of literary analysis. During our class discussions, students had acquired a lively and vigorous understanding of Hemingway's style. Their laughter came not from thoughtless derision, but from the pleasure of recognition.

Before I wrote up my final assignment for *The Nick Adams Stories,* I tested the extent of my topic's appeal. I told students about the annual International Imitation Hemingway Competition sponsored by Harry's Bar and American Grill. I read the requirements of the award to them: "Write one really good page of really 'bad' Hemingway. It can be funny. It can be very funny. It should be a parody—an action scene, dialogue, character sketch, etc." Silence and attention. Next I added the description of the award itself: "Round trip airfare for two from winner's home to Florence, Italy, plus dinner for two at Harry's Bar and American Grill in Florence, Italy." Cheeks immediately began to brighten, eyes opened wide, and pens seemed to vault into students' hands ready to go.

The next day, I brought in the writing assignment:

> There is, as you now know, an international award given each year for the best parody of Ernest Hemingway's writing style. A parody is "a literary work that broadly mimics an author's characteristic style and holds it up to ridicule." You certainly know enough about Hemingway's style by now to be able to write a story that humorously exaggerates (and makes fun of) his particular trademarks. Your assignment, then, is to write a short story that parodies Hemingway's style (and themes as well, if you choose).

I didn't want to exhaust the topic's possibilities in our pre-writing session. If students hear too much, they sometimes have difficulty thinking of ideas other than those mentioned in class. But I did think it was important to make sure that their understanding of parody and Hemingway's style was clear by briefly brainstorming ideas.

For several minutes, it was impossible to maintain any order. One suggestion toppled into another until we were all breathless from chatter and laughter. This was their opportunity to get at the sacred Hemingway.

"I know!" giggled one student. "You could have people who are depressed or resigned to fate turn against the wall.

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Have all these people keep turning against a wall, again and again, over and over."

I asked her where she remembered this gesture in *The Nick Adams Stories.* She vividly recalled the husband in "Indian Camp" who had rolled over to slit his throat, unable to stand an instant more of his wife's labor screams. Students eagerly cited other examples: Ole Anderson in "The Killers" had turned toward a wall after telling Nick he would no longer run away from the thugs who haunted his past; Carper in "Night Before Landing" had rolled toward the wall, drunk, afraid of the war he was returning to.

They moved from laughing about significant gestures to considering the humor of Hemingway's having characters engage in the same activities again and again. Just a phrase made our entire group smile broadly. "Trout fishing!" "Bullfighting!" "Making camp!" "Boxing and boxers!" "Skiing!" The list that students came up with could only have been Hemingway's.

"How about the way your sentences are going to look?" I interrupted. They were ready for that as well, although it took a minute before anyone volunteered anything specific enough to be helpful. "Reticence!" someone shouted. It was a word they hadn't known before Hemingway, but certainly understood after twenty-four stories. "Sentences that look simple but have special meaning."

"Like what?" I asked, making sure they weren't simply playing back teacher-terms and really did have a good idea of how to begin arranging their own sentences for the parody.

"For instance," one boy began, "the way Nick made camp in 'Big Two-Hearted River' showed a lot about how nervous and cautious he was after coming home from war."

"Remember the beans and spaghetti in that story?" another student asked in the same way a familiar group of friends might immediately touch base with the question, "Remember the one—?" They had indeed remembered: the description of the frying pan, the bubbles the beans and spaghetti made as they warmed, the dousing with tomato catsup. They had loved sentences like this one: "Nick got out a bottle of tomato catsup and cut four slices of bread." (Closely related, of course, to "He liked to open cans.") But they knew all such sentences, though potentially very funny and, at times, nerve-fraying for the reader, were often hints from Hemingway about Nick's need for method, pattern, order. And when we had arrived at the sentence, "His tongue was very sensitive," they recognized, as well, that Hemingway was talking about more than beans and spaghetti. Hemingway could put all of human experience—its pleasure and anguish—in a taste bud.

They remembered, too, how ironic Hemingway's prose often was. We recalled the seemingly docile Bugs telling Nick in "The Battler" why he had been in prison: "I was in for cuttin' a man." Suddenly Bugs' efforts to keep cooking knives in his own possession seemed more than precautionary. They mentioned, as well, Alice's use of profanity in "The Light of the World." Or Nick's father, after somewhat perversely informing his son about Prudie's sexual disloyalty, looking at the pie and asking Nick, "Have some more?" Students thought of Nick in "An Alpine Idyll" complaining about the hot May sun and the boredom of skiing, while Olz, a poor, hard-working peasant, uncomplainingly shoveled dirt over the body of his wife who had been dead since winter but whom he had only now been able to transport to town for burial.

After this, students began thinking, more and more quickly, of specific ideas for their own parodies. One student, for example, had earlier been exasperated by Hemingway's incorporation of significant book titles into his stories. The mention of *Wuthering Heights* in "The Last Good Country," for instance, hinted that Nick and his sister Littless would have to resolve their vaguely incestuous attraction to each other. That in "The Three-Day Blow" Nick "couldn't get into" *Richard Feverel* quietly let us know that Nick was not yet ready to admit his true reason for breaking up with Marge: in his arrogance, Nick, like Sir Austin Feverel, feared the consequences and "look" of a marriage between people of very different social and economic backgrounds. *Wuthering Heights* and *Richard Feverel* were only two of many volumes alluded to, and my student had read none of them except *Swiss Family Robinson.* He vowed, sneering malevolently, that he would figure out a way to work into his parody every book he had ever read.

Another student began to imagine a symbolic introductory segment, much like that of "Big Two-Hearted River." In the Hemingway story, the fish Nick looked at in the second and third paragraphs immediately defined his own condition: it, like Nick, was trying to keep steady in the brisk current, "with wavering fins." The student considered absurd alternative images, such as a fluttering sparrow with a broken wing or a half-baked worm in the afternoon sun.

Enough had been discussed. Now I was certain that students were not only eager to begin, but also ready. They were as familiar with Hemingway's style and themes as I had hoped. After weeks and weeks of careful textual study (where all successful literature-related topics begin), they were ready to parody the master and dream about sampling Italian cuisine at Harry's.

I gave them a week and asked that the papers be two or three pages handwritten. All week, each day before class, I heard them laughing about twists they had thought of or giving one another ideas. This was clearly a good assignment for these tenth-graders. At this age, they must begin developing analytical skills, but also be allowed the opportunities to enjoy writing and to laugh. Parody is a perfect format for all of these. A parody cannot be written well without analytical facility, but it encourages a somewhat more energetic and palatable approach than the more conventional analytical essay.

The results were superb. They confirmed that the students really did understand Hemingway. And I was pleased, at the same time, by the wit and imagination nearly every paper displayed.

There were, of course, touches I had expected to find after our pre-writing session. A lot of cans were opened, and a lot of Nicks/Dicks/Ricks turned against walls. But even here were surprises. One girl, for example, made her hero look especially ludicrous. After "Mick" burned his marshmallows, he panicked and tensed. "He looked around," she wrote. "There were no walls. Mick turned against a tree." She added, before proceeding with her narrative, "It was a while before Mick would turn around again."

But many papers represented powerful extensions of our discussion in class and a careful reconsideration of the points

we had raised. Titles, to begin with, offered strong invitations to the essays. "A Farewell to Trouts." "Eighty-five Shots." "An Alpine Idol." "Dick Builds a Snowman."

The author of "Dick Builds a Snowman" remembered the importance of psychological associations in Hemingway. In a work like, "Now I Lay Me," even the recollection of fishing bait and jars of snakes had triggered harsher war memories for the vulnerable Nick Adams. The student who wrote about Dick making a snowman trivialized the associative power of her hero's mind:

> Quickly, Dick shaped the snow into a ball by rolling and patting it with his hands which were really numb and cold, but he did not mind it because he liked it. When the snowball was finished, Dick threw it high into the air. The snowball spun towards the sun and the sky, flashing brilliantly, turning and spinning. Then it began to fall, making Dick think of the fish swimming in the big stream on the Black.

The author of this parody also made fun of another prominent feature of Hemingway's fiction: the quietly significant ending. Like Nick in "Big Two-Hearted River," who couldn't complete his fishing, who was afraid of the tragic adventure that lay ahead in the swamp, Dick could not finish constructing his snowman. "Walking all around the frozen, stacked balls," her final paragraph began, "Dick thought it looked like a snowman. He named it Yemedge. Dick had forgotten to put a face on Yemedge. He would do it tomorrow, maybe."

The creator of Dick and his snowman also elaborated on the idea of a character's ordinary gestures providing psychological insight. She showed Dick eating breakfast before the ordeal of the snowman began:

> Dick went downstairs. He shivered in the early-morning chill of the air. There were two eggs on the table. They had been fried in butter. Dick ate them and two pieces of toast which he had spread with margarine. It was a good breakfast. He did not eat any bacon. He did not like to eat meat. It was too painful.

Dick has become, we learn, a vegetarian. We smile at the author's ability to keep our understanding of his conversion excessively vague. A little later, pain again presented itself, this time in the form of the wool scarf Dick wrapped around his neck.

> Dick walked back downstairs. The boots made pleasant clomping sounds on the wooden steps. In the kitchen, there were two hooks by the back door. On the right hook hung a long, wool scarf. Dick took the scarf. He wound it around his neck, going counterclockwise, careful not to wrap it too tightly. He wrapped it around his neck two more times.

Poor Dick. This is surely no normal winter he is preparing for so cautiously.

Other stories parodied Hemingway's choice of scene and descriptions of movement. One student, for example, had Rick Musselbaum, owner of a World War I ambulance, drive to a tavern, then to a boxing ring, next to a bullfighting arena, and finally to a river to fish. The quick progression was humorous and outrageous. Still another student made fun of Hemingway's tedious descriptions of minute movements:

> He gathered the coffee beans and flapjack mix and put them in his tent. He came out of his tent.

One boy mocked the convention of the model hero or heroine. He added to our sizeable list of exemplary figures (Alice, John Packard, Ole Anderson, the major, and so on) the name of Ernest Noway. Ernest was a very dull, middle-aged man who smoked cigarettes while drawing graffiti on the wall toward which he was always turned. The student's Nick Adams figure found Ernest Noway in a hotel lobby somewhere in Northern Michigan. Nick's face brightened up as he saw the man facing the wall, spirals of yellow smoke seeming to float from the top of his head. He quickly approached the man, and the following conversation ensued:

> "At last," Nick cried. "I've found someone who can help me!"
>
> Ernest Noway stared at the wall.
>
> "Please," Nick begged, "can you kindly tell me the causes of the Protestant Reformation?"
>
> Ernest Noway continued to stare at the wall. "Get lost," he finally muttered in a gravelly voice.
>
> "Gee," said Nick. "I thought I could *learn* from you. I thought you could. . . O just forget it. I. . . I. . . I. . . I'm speechless."

One girl enjoyed focusing on Hemingway's word choices. She decided to exaggerate her hero's use of the word "swell." In stories such as "The Three-Day Blow" and "Cross Country Snow" we had discussed Hemingway's incorporation of such terms to emphasize Nick's naïveté. The student's hero, Brick Adams, began the story by drinking tomato juice.

> "Gee,' said Brick as he opened a can of juice, "this tomato juice sure tastes swell. Swell as that tomato juice Roy used to give me. Boy, was Roy swell. Swell juice that swell Roy gave me. Just swell. Gee."

She returned to the word after she got Brick to a trout stream.

> Brick was at the river.
>
> "All is swell!" said Brick. The sun went down.
>
> He hurried to the river. He stepped on a thorn. His foot began to swell. "Swell!" he cried. "It can't swell. All is swell and now it's swelling. Oh, I wish things would never change. I wish all would be swell."

Larger and larger the list of parodied conventions and techniques grew. After I had read all the papers and made corrections and suggestions, students read them to one another in class. We took two days for this. Students eagerly made follow-up recommendations about their classmates' work, constructively trying to explain where any opportunity for humor had been missed. And, as others read out loud, they heard things that would improve their own work. They were then given a week to revise their papers using my comments as well as student reactions.

Students worked carefully on sections that needed a little more crafting. The student who wrote about Nick's movement into and out of his tent, for example, added a sequence. The new paragraph looked this way:

> He gathered the coffee beans and flapjack mix and put them in his tent. He took the pot and pan back in his tent. Soon he came back out. He had forgotten the syrup. He wiped off the syrup and carefully carried it inside his tent.

The Nick Adams figure here might be mistaken for a sight-gag comedian.

Next I gave them a choice. They could submit their parodies to *Bufo,* our school literary journal, for consideration. Or, they could cross their fingers, dream about Italian villas, and gently slide their manuscripts into envelopes addressed to Harry's Bar and American Grill, 2020 Avenue of the Stars, Los Angeles, CA 90067.

Write to the Heart of Literature

Teaching Literature and Essay Writing

by Peter Sears

ENGLISH TEACHERS KNOW ALL TOO WELL HOW frustrating it is to have a good classroom discussion of an essay question and then later to receive a dismal set of essays on that question. The problems of teaching writing do not end with getting students to put something on paper in response to an essay question. The problems begin.

Teaching literature and essay writing

What is the best way to teach essay writing? What is the best way to teach literature? These two questions are closely related because the best way to teach essay writing is as an expression of ideas about literature. This position runs contrary to the common practice of teaching essay writing as a separate endeavor, the emphasis being put on structure and technical correctness. The structural approach does not work well with students because they are not interested in the essay as a mode of writing. What they do care about, or can be encouraged to care about, is their own ideas. The most effective way to teach essay writing is to focus on the content of students' ideas about particular works of literature. Below, I offer a method, a series of questions, for students to use in tackling any work of literature. This series of questions encourages students to develop the substantial content necessary for strong essays.

To write a good essay about a work of literature requires clear thinking about that work. The questions you raise about the work have a built-in obstacle: students expect every question to have an answer. Their schooling supports this expectation. Teaching literature involves asking questions, some of which have answers, but literature does not finally have answers. The factual questions that students are asked about a novel or play or poem do not add up to an explanation of that work. Instead, they provide sure footing for asking more probing questions, the interpretive questions. Yet even students mature enough to retain two views on a single question want to know which view is "right" because they assume that a book has an overriding answer.

"Easy" books and "hard" books

To "solve" novels commonly taught in ninth grade, students look beyond the story line to find the general meaning, often called the "theme" or "main idea." Show how the theme is central and, young students believe, the novel is explained.

PETER SEARS's "What Do You Say About a Terrible Poem?" was the lead article in issue 16/5 of *T&W Magazine.* He is the new director of the Oregon Arts Commission's Artists-in-the-Schools program. Next year T&W will publish his book on teaching writing through codes.

Trying to push ninth graders beyond recognizing the theme may be premature. Likewise, encouraging them to write more than a clear, logical essay in which specifics are evidence of a theme may be too ambitious. So what is the teacher to do? First, build up skills and confidence with "easy" books. An easy book is one that can be reduced to an explanation, a summarizing statement. *Lord of the Flies* is an easy book. The conflict of ideas is clearly represented in the conflict among the characters. The abstract meaning of the novel is demonstrated in the action.

Seen simply as a struggle between a man and a fish, *The Old Man and the Sea* is an easy book too. However, in the Old Man's apparently contradictory feelings for the fish, the book becomes "hard"—and harder still in the puzzling notions the Old Man expresses about himself and what he has done in losing the fish to sharks. The novel is hard because, first, the real conflict is not between protagonist and antagonist but within one character and, second—and this is crucial—the conflict is *not* clearly resolved.

Is the novel worse for this lack of resolution? No, on the contrary. A clear ending, clear as to the author's intention, might falsify the character of the Old Man and reduce the story to the demonstration of a point. The novel could then be explained and put aside. Instead, it remains mysterious. Thus, literature holds our attention, provokes us to re-read, to feel and think—about what? About the novel and about life, not only interchangeably, but, ideally, simultaneously. We experience our own hope, fear, wonder, and loneliness. Rather than offering us stories engrossing only for how they turn out, literature makes us feel how a person's life can be propelled by, for example, irresolvable conflict, the drama of which is not in resolution but in the intimacy of the tension. Literature embodies the complexity and ambiguity of life. At its heart, literature is mysterious.

Teaching the nature of literature

One can start to teach the nature of literature by talking with students about experiences they have had that are contradictory and irresolvable. For example, one may ask, is there something you love and hate, and have you felt these two conflicting emotions at the same time? If so, do you think it's crazy? Another example: have you ever wanted to be alone and with someone, simultaneously? Another: can you recall being somewhere, at a party for example, and wanting to stay *and* leave? And another: have you looked forward to something so much that you became sure that it was not going to occur, even though you knew it was, or you became so excited beforehand that you were afraid for it to happen?

These highly personal and intense moments are the material of literature. Mixed feelings, contradiction, confusion, ambiguity, ambivalence, and paradox are common to literature because they are common to our lives. In the way we feel peculiar and isolated, we are closer to other people, not farther away. Literature expresses this strange intimacy.

Literature takes us below the surface of things, deeper than answerable questions. Little is certain here but the intensity of the personal experience. To write about these feelings as they are expressed in literature is to write to the heart of literature. This writing is exciting—but it is hard because there is no sure-fire guidebook, much less any summarizing explanation once you have completed the exploration. Besides, students are often hesitant to try such writing because they know, intuitively, that in talking and writing about feelings they will be revealing themselves.

Moving from easy questions to hard questions about a "hard" novel

As hesitant as students may be to engage a work of literature that touches deeply their own feelings, they can, over the four years of high school, rise through the three stages of thinking necessary for writing a strong essay about a "hard" novel:

1. reading for plot: no ideas
2. reading for theme: general ideas
3. total reading: ambiguous ideas

Ninth graders have already learned to read for plot and, over the course of the year, can learn to read for theme as well. Here are four common essay questions for *The Old Man and the Sea* that accommodate ninth graders' capacity with general ideas:

1. Is the Old Man triumphant?
2. Is the Old Man defeated?
3. Is the Old Man triumphant and defeated?
4. How is the Old Man both triumphant and defeated?

The increasing difficulty of these questions is evident to the students, but none of these questions confronts them with an ambiguous issue. No question goes beyond the idea that the Old Man is triumphant in catching the fish and defeated in losing the fish to sharks. Question four may hint at a more complex view of the novel, but as it stands it is no more than changing an emphatic yes answer to question three into a question. Still, able ninth graders can be nudged a step further by being asked to compare his triumph to his defeat:

5. Which is greater, his triumph or his defeat?

To move from the second level of general ideas to the third level of ambiguous ideas requires dropping the assumption that the triumph and defeat are totally separable and opposed to one another. This is a hard idea for ninth graders, but it can be introduced by another straightforward comparison:

6. Which is greater, the physical challenge of catching the fish or the emotional challenge of losing it to sharks?

If the students immediately favor the physical challenge and call the question silly, then you might try to encourage, gingerly, a description of the emotional challenge; however, it's likely the students are simply revealing that they are not ready to go beyond the second level of general ideas. On the other hand, ninth graders sensitive to the difference between physical and emotional challenges might actually *like* this question—I've seen it—and they proudly support the emotional challenge as the greater of the two. Should they do so, they are in a position to consider the novel in a more profound way than any of the original four questions called for. Nevertheless, without being given question six, even very able ninth graders are hard pressed to grasp the following abstract re-conceiving of question three:

7. Is the Old Man triumphant in defeat as well as in success?

Without question six, question seven seems silly to a ninth grader because it is a contradiction. Yet what if there is something to this contradiction? What if the contradiction is only apparent, a paradox?

Ninth graders generally don't understand paradox. Students in higher grades have real difficulty in understanding paradox. Yet what if moving toward the heart of a work of literature requires the asking of paradoxical questions? Then, obviously, students need to understand paradox. Without it, the third level of understanding, the level of ambiguous ideas, will remain out of reach.

Question seven is the first of the series that is of the third level of understanding. The question is not as far as one can go in searching for a paradoxical center to the novel. An even harder, more paradoxical question is:

8. Is the Old Man more triumphant in defeat than in success?

Obviously, students can shy away by answering no and simply adapting their essays to question seven. But the change from question seven to question eight implies the dropping of the comparison altogether, by asking:

9. Is the Old Man triumphant in defeat?

The most emphatic way to state this idea is the most paradoxical:

10. How is the Old Man triumphant in defeat?

Paradox in two other hard novels: *Huck Finn* and *Catcher*

These increasingly difficult questions chart a line of thinking to a complex interpretation of the novel. *The Old Man and the Sea* is not exceptional in requiring an understanding of paradox for attaining a full grasp of the novel. Any hard book requires this understanding. That is what "hard" means. A hard book is one in which the main character's conflict is not fully resolved, and the effort to interpret the book as fully as possible requires an understanding of paradox. So teachers from the ninth grade up need to keep trying to get the idea of paradox across.

How else, for example, can students comprehend why Holden Caulfield, at the end of *The Catcher in the Rye,* wants to see Stradlater again, among others? Wasn't Stradlater just a selfish, conceited jerk of a jock who ruthlessly threatened the purity of Holden's beloved Jane? Forgive him? Perhaps. But *want* to see him? Impossible. Yet this is precisely what Holden wants at the end of the novel, and understanding this change of heart is critical to recognizing the healing effect of Holden's telling of his own story. Miss this point and the basic thrust of the novel is lost.

The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn, a wonderful story for seventh graders and a meaningful story full of many themes for ninth graders, is, finally, totally accessible only to students with an understanding of paradox. If Huck is such an innately good guy, why doesn't he go ahead and free his beloved Jim? Why all the hemming and hawing? Why all the isolated adventures? And why, above all, all this deciding to do the right thing for the "wrong" reason?

The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn, The Catcher in the Rye, and *The Old Man and the Sea* are hard novels. They cannot be totally explained. They require, for total engagement, a level of understanding beyond most ninth graders. They should be taught at higher grades. Even then, students need assistance in moving beyond the general ideas to the ambiguous ideas. Students need to focus on the main charac-

ter's conflict and, more pressing, they need a way to cope with the novel beyond the resolution of the main character's conflict. We need something like the ten specific questions above, but questions that could be applied to any hard novel. Students need such a series of questions to lead them to the primary question of the novel. Deciding on the primary question is an interpretive act, granted, but having a primary question is essential to thinking the novel through and trying to write about it sensibly.

The question sheet for finding the primary question for a hard novel

SEVEN QUESTIONS
FOR FINDING THE PRIMARY QUESTION OF A NOVEL

1. What is the main character's conflict?
2. Is this conflict fully resolved? If so, you need only describe how the conflict is fully resolved; your description constitutes a full examination of the novel.
3. If not, to what extent is the conflict resolved?
4. About the area that is not resolved, "the gray area," what questions can you ask?
5. Which of these questions seems to be the most important?
6. Does this question include, one way or the other, whichever other questions you regard as important? If not, find a question that does.
7. If so, you have found *the primary question,* the most important question. How far can you go with "the primary question" in probing the ambiguous meaning of the novel?

Students like the step-by-step approach of these questions. Inevitably though, some students ask for more assistance. For them you might expand this question sheet as you see fit or adapt points from the following, longer version, which includes explanation:

SEVEN QUESTIONS
FOR FINDING THE PRIMARY QUESTION OF A NOVEL

1. What is the main character's conflict?
   This struggle may not only be with another person, group, or natural phenomenon, but may also be between two personal values held by the main character.
2. Is this conflict fully resolved?
   If the main character's conflict is just practical, like escaping from a dangerous situation, the conflict is likely to be fully resolved in success or failure. A full resolution through plot makes the book easy to understand; thus, an easy book is one in which the main character's conflict is fully resolved in action or statement. Likewise, a hard book is one in which the main character's conflict is *not* fully resolved. You complete your examination of an easy book by describing the full resolution. Completing your examination of a hard book is more involved. You do so by using the following questions:
3. If the conflict is not fully resolved, to what extent is it resolved?
   Much of this information is factual. Still, opinions may differ as to what extent the conflict is resolved. That's all right. Decide for yourself—and realize that opinions may differ too about what exactly is the main character's conflict.
4. About the area that is *not* resolved, "the gray area," what questions can you ask?
   The questions you are looking for are not factual. They are interpretive. Interpretive questions cannot be answered in a definite, proven way. So the questions you are looking for are hard. But so is the book. The appropriate questions for a hard book are hard questions.
5. Which of these questions seem to be the most important?
   You are looking for the question that goes to the heart of the novel. A good way to find out is to decide which question is the hardest. This question is likely to be the most important question. Again, opinions may differ. They should, because we are in the interpretive area of the novel. Your deciding on what is the most important question is a personal choice.
6. Does this important question include, one way or the other, whichever other questions you regard as important?
   You probably listed a lot of "hard" questions, and you may have had difficulty picking the most important one. Now, that difficulty becomes your advantage. Look again at your list of questions. Pick out the ones you feel are the best. Test one of these against the one you first selected as the most important. Does your original choice still stand up as the most important? Does it include, one way or the other, this other, good question? In other words, would an answer to your first-choice question also answer the other, good question? If so, your selection remains the most important question. If not, then the other, good question is better than the one you first picked. So take this new one and compare it to the remaining, good questions. In other words, keep testing the good questions, your original one included, against one another until you are satisfied that one question is more important than any of the others.
7. If so, then you have found the primary question. How far can you go with the primary question in probing the meaning of the novel? How far you can go with the primary question is how far you can go in interpreting the novel. Take the question and aim it at "the gray area"; use it to explore as many possibilities as you can, possibilities of suggested rather than stated meaning. Remember: an idea, an insight, may be very worthwhile without being provable. You are not going to come up with an interpretation that you, or anyone else, can prove conclusively, much less prove to be the only possible interpretation. Keep in mind—this is important—that you are simply trying to offer a sensible approach to what is neither entirely clear nor fully resolved.

   Your method for doing this is simple: you decide on what is the most important question; you apply this question to the novel and offer your opinions and personal views. In other words, you use your primary question to focus your interpretation. And this is as far as you can go in examining the novel. In short, a full examination of a novel equals describing what is fully resolved of the main character's conflict plus interpreting what is not fully resolved.

Whatever your students' response to the primary question may be, stress how important their opinions are. How one *regards* the primary question is one's personal intepretation of the book. For example, question nine of the series for *The Old Man and the Sea* is, "Is The Old Man triumphant in defeat?" Let's say that this question is selected as the primary question.Obviously, the direction of the thinking suggests that, yes, the Old Man *is* triumphant in defeat. But that position is only one interpretation of the novel. Another is that the Old Man is *not* triumphant in defeat, and many other possible positions exist between a categorical yes and a categorical no.

The more students become involved in debating one interpretation against another, and another, the more sympathetic they will become to the basic point that a novel does not have an answer. A novel may suggest an interpretation that seems significantly more sensible than others, but an interpretation is not an answer. Student acceptance of this fact of literature is a major breakthrough for the teacher: it shows students getting rid of what has been for them a major stumbling block.

Coping with the exceptionally hard work of literature

This question sheet, in either the long or short form, works well for most hard books taught in high school. Specifically, it works well for those books in which the ambiguity is contained within one main character. When the ambiguity ranges beyond the main character, the method becomes inadequate.

I learned this the hard way when, excited about the method, I asked my advanced sophomores to select the most difficult work of literature they had read. Unanimous: *Macbeth.* The method didn't work for *Macbeth,* for one cannot talk about Macbeth without talking about Lady Macbeth and, though less so, Banquo and the witches. So, having to abandon the sheet of seven questions, I began to write questions about the particular play. This customized type of question sheet is a more involved effort to lead students to the primary question (or *a* primary question) of an especially difficult work of literature.

QUESTION SHEET FOR *MACBETH*

Macbeth opens with a prophecy. Does the prophecy become true because that is what a prophecy is? Because the witches determine it? Because Macbeth, with the help of Lady Macbeth, makes it come true?

The first prophecy has two parts. How does Macbeth become Thane of Cawdor? Does this event change his attitude toward the second part of the prophecy?

Macbeth tells his wife of the two-part prophecy and of becoming Thane of Cawdor. Lady Macbeth tries to persuade him to make the prophecy come true. In her success, is she responsible for the consequences? If so, does this responsibility extend to Macbeth's subsequent murders? Is Macbeth responsible for her eventual madness?

Why doesn't Macbeth wait for the second part of the prophecy to become true? Does he anticipate the consequences of murder? Is this second and critical part of the prophecy a false prophecy, a mere temptation? Is the first part a prophecy at all?

At Macbeth's first encounter with the witches, Banquo receives a prophecy too. For his prophecy to become true, must the present king be deposed? If so, is Banquo's prophecy dependent on Macbeth's prophecy? If it is, must the witches know that Macbeth will kill the King? That would make their knowledge supernatural. Can the critical part of Macbeth's first prophecy be, then, only a temptation? If not, can Macbeth be held fully responsible? Or even Macbeth and Lady Macbeth? Who does Macbeth say is responsible?

Macbeth believes he will be happy once he becomes king. Is he? Does he suspect why he isn't? Does he see his becoming king changed by what he did to effect it? If he feels remorse, why does he keep murdering?

Using the Macbeth question sheet

To compose this question sheet, I wrote all the questions I could think of and then grouped them according to subject. They remained too disjointed to be helpful. To limit the avalanche effect of question after question, I interspersed declarative sentences. These also helped maintain continuity once I had set the questions in what I regarded as their natural order.

I handed out the question sheet well before the end of our discussion of the play. It was met with groans. Why not? The questions are hard. Then I told the students their essay question: Is Macbeth responsible for the evil deeds of the play? They looked again at the question sheet. Now it looked better. They asked questions from it. Trying to answer the questions brought out different ways of responding to them. I reminded the students that the questions are interrelated. They saw that the questions are grouped in paragraphs according to subject. I showed them how, in many cases, an implied answer to one question is used as the basis for the next question and that this relationship is often signaled with the phrase "if so" or "if it is." I encouraged them to deal with one paragraph of questions at a time. This suggestion definitely helped.

They began to establish a line of thinking in response to the question sheet. I suggested that they write down this line of thinking in at least an outline form. Next, we looked again at the essay question I had assigned. We talked about it and about the line of thinking they had worked out from the question sheet. Did their line of thinking apply directly to the essay question? If so, they could start writing a draft of their essay. If not, they should go back and re-aim their line of thinking directly at the essay question. I acknowledged how truly difficult the essay question is and suggested that they figure out perhaps two lines of thinking, two different arguments in response to the essay question, and then compare them—perhaps even use the weaker one to support, by contrast, the stronger one. They had their hands full, and they knew it. Yet they liked trying to develop a powerful argument on behalf of their position on the essay question. Moving from an outline to a suitable draft was, however, inevitably difficult, but here I could be helpful by reading through their drafts and spotting places they might go back to and either rethink or rewrite or both.

The Macbeth student essays: going beyond the predictable

Their essays turned out better than those I had received in previous years. No bland generalizing of violence begetting violence or of good versus evil. There were fewer efforts to reduce the play to a moral lesson or to force Macbeth into the heroic image of a man whose only flaw was his ambition

or to brush off the witches as a figment of Macbeth's imagination.

What convinced me of the value of the question sheet was that some students went beyond the idea of temptation, the idea that the play is nothing more than a powerful evocation of the capacity of evil to corrupt good. This general notion, when applied, means that once Macbeth becomes enamored of the possibility of becoming king, he does anything to satisfy his desire. This idea of temptation does less well with why Macbeth continues murdering. Nevertheless, to go beyond this oversimplification of the play, one must raise either the question of the witches' power or the meaning of Banquo's prophecy. Yet neither question arises to students naturally.The witches simply appear to be a foil to Macbeth, and Banquo's prophecy appears to be only another prod to Macbeth's desire. Even if students look again at the witches and Banquo, they cannot readily pose the needed questions (which constitute the next-to-last paragraph of the question sheet).

On the other hand, once students re-consider Banquo's prophecy, they may take hold of it and insist, as mine did, that for Banquo's prophecy to become true, Macbeth *must* kill the king. My students dismissed the possibility that the king could be deposed by any other means than force. This conclusion about Banquo's prophecy significantly complicated their interpretation of the play because taking Banquo's prophecy seriously requires granting the witches real significance. Their new interpretation of the play added the witches to Macbeth and Lady Macbeth as characters responsible for the evil deeds of the play.

Students reaching this point have accomplished a lot. But my students didn't see it this way, for they saw only the profound complexity of *Macbeth.* Recognizing, through Banquo, the possible role of the witches in determining the evil deeds, they faced squarely the ambiguity of the play. How is one to allocate sensibly the responsibility for the evil deeds to Macbeth, Lady Macbeth, and the witches? Whatever allocation plan one may tentatively work out can easily be put in question by raising another point. This primary question of responsibility is not to be resolved but, rather, to be grasped as pivotal. Nevertheless, to articulate the question of responsibility by exploring the ways of looking at it is to probe the play as deeply as possible.

I teach *Macbeth* because it is enigmatic, because the story is terrific, because Macbeth and Lady Macbeth are engrossing, and because a hard question about a hard book may light a fire or two, especially when accompanied by a question sheet. Students *know* that *Macbeth* is hard. They recognize the challenge as well as the ethical morass one must step into in order to take on the challenge. Yet they need and deserve the challenge. And what about a teaching challenge? As a teacher I *need* books like *Macbeth.* It engages me. What engages the teacher has a better chance of engaging students.

The obstacle to teaching essay writing

Engaged students write better essays. They get to know the story well enough to support their contentions with examples. They actually enjoy developing interpretations. And most important, they write with purpose; they have something to say and they try to say it. Yet they are not likely to improve their writing significantly until one more big obstacle is removed: students do not like the essay form. They see the essay as restrictive and boring.

What is sad is that they don't understand the essay. They regard it as solely the sequence of assertion, development, and reiteration, which is how it is often taught.

This unnecessarily limited approach causes students to dismiss perfectly acceptable variations in logical development because the variations do not fit the essay pattern as students know it. Take *Macbeth,* for example. Whereas one student's approach to my essay question about responsibility may fit nicely into the standard sequence of assertion, development, and reiteration, another student's approach may not fit at all because the latter student wants to begin by commenting on a single speech or scene and only then introduce the main point.

Likewise, a premium on technical correctness from the start may inhibit a student from developing good content and thorough coverage if only because going beyond the minimal length increases the chances for technical miscues. The requirement for a clearcut topic sentence for each paragraph and, more damaging, a set number of paragraphs are other constraints that undermine interest in expressing oneself. Imagine trying to write cogently about *Macbeth* while simultaneously worrying about "rules for the essay." It is no wonder that many student essays are cautious, bland, superficial, and inconclusive.

Beginning the teaching of essay writing with anything resembling "rules for the essay" is just plain silly and justifying such rules as criteria necessary for evaluation is hogwash. To teach "rules for the essay" before teaching how to get an essay started is to put the cart before the horse. You can't learn how to write an essay until you just plain write your ideas and someone else then tells you how you might fashion them into an essay. The rules come long after one gets something on paper. Form follows substance. Students don't like the essay because they are taught what it is *supposed* to be before they have any idea of what it *can* be.

First, a student needs an idea, (perhaps help in phrasing the idea), help in how to support the idea, in what to do then with the idea, and in how to relate one idea to another. Critical questions that precede "rules for the essay" are: How do you recognize what your main idea should be? How do you indicate it as the main idea? How do you connect other ideas to it? How do you focus on the main idea at the end of the essay? By working from their own ideas, students can come to see the essay as a means of self-expression.

The essay is a flexible mode of writing

The place to begin is the choosing of stimulating material and asking the students a clear, challenging question. Occasionally, students write good essays about a personal experience or a familiar social issue, but literature remains, I believe, the best material because students perceive it as definitely separate from them, and the teacher can really help to create their experience of engaging the work of literature.

From the contents of the book, the teacher can move easily to the contents of an essay. In other words, from the students' reading and class discussion, the teacher can simply focus the discussion on the assigned essay question. The students ask about the question. In doing so, they try out their ideas. Gradually, they form some sort of organized response to the assigned essay question. The teacher can encourage this solidifying process by picking up on an idea offered tentatively in class discussion and mapping out, perhaps on

the board, a logical strategy for thoroughly presenting the idea. I would suggest doing more than one such outline; otherwise, many students will use the one they have been given as a model.

Another good way to drive home the basic freedom of the essay is to demonstrate that no question determines how it is to be addressed. For example, the question of whether or not Macbeth is a hero could be addressed with the following series of points.

1. Macbeth is (or is not) a hero.
2. Characteristics of a hero.
3. Characteristics of Macbeth.
4. Conclusion: Macbeth is (or is not) a hero.

This plan follows the standard sequence of assertion, development, and reiteration, and two and three may be reversed or mixed without either impairing the logic or breaking from the standard essay format. An equally logical essay might open with two and then move to one. The standard format of the essay does not allow for this variation, however. Nor does it allow for another approach, opening with two and three and dropping one altogether, implying it in a transition to three. Yet this variation might work as well as any of these others. So might beginning with three. The point is that there is no single way to organize a logically sound essay; therefore, to say that one *must* begin with the main statement and return to it in the conclusion is simply to limit incorrectly the possibilities of logical development.

To teach essay writing requires emphasizing that it is a flexible mode of writing. That means the freedom to begin anywhere—with an incident, a quote, a thesis statement, a question, a speculation, an observation—whatever is a natural starting point to a chain reaction of ideas.

Writing an essay begins with content, not form

An essay grows from the inside, from its content, not from the outside, its form (or structure). Students should be encouraged to begin as randomly as they like, just jotting down ideas. Have them do it in class. They are to write as many ideas as they can think of that bear on the question. Then they are to read through these ideas and see if one strikes them as primary or if there is some sort of natural sequence to the ideas. Once they have the focus of one idea or the sequence of two or three ideas, they are ready to try to write a rough draft. They are to be reminded, though, that what they are working with is one possible approach to the assigned question, not an ironclad position or argument.

This reminder is important, because otherwise they may feel stupid or wrong if they find their writing going off in another direction. This happens frequently to students who are less at ease with abstract planning than they are in simply writing their way to their subject. As one of my students put it, "Before I start writing my draft, I think I know what I think, but it's only when I actually write that I find out what I really think." Such students are prone to having trouble in deciding what their main point is; they tend to shoot off on many false starts. Yet once they become focused, they often write better than the students who know from the first outlining effort what they are going to say. For many students, the most important work occurs in the initial freewriting or even before. This part of the process of writing the essay is obviously the hardest for the teacher to keep tabs on. Yet it can be supported by the teacher's saying that it *is* important and allowing sufficient time for the students' ideas to brew on paper.

Here is a sequence of steps for getting an essay started:

1. Freewrite ideas.
2. Pick out the good ones.
3. Either use one as a focus, as a main idea, or two or three as a focusing sequence of ideas.
4. Use this focus to write a draft.
5. Be ready to go off in another direction if you find yourself leaving your focus behind.
6. Read what you have written and decide what of it you like and either delete or re-write the other parts.
7. Concentrate on the middle section of your draft before you look hard at either the beginning or the end.
8. Check to see that whatever you end up with in draft form progresses logically from idea to idea.
9. Check that each generality is supported by specifics.
10. Check the logic of your essay draft against the assigned question to make sure your essay addresses the question directly.

All these steps have to do with content. Only after completing these steps are students to be directed to look closely at technique. So after number ten comes a big

THEN 11. Check the writing. Check for clarity, conciseness, word choice, sentence structure, paragraphing, punctuation, capitalization, and spelling.

It is argued against this teaching approach that the split between content and technique is artificial and, thus, wrong. True, an idea is no better than its phrasing, but the fact of the matter is that students learn better and develop more confidence if they do one thing at a time. Content is the basis of their essay, so it should come first and all by itself. This sequence is all the more practical because students who *like* their content may actually become interested in trying to present it as well as possible.

A second argument against this premium being placed on content is that some students need a form of some sort before they begin. They write better, it is argued, if they know what they are trying to create. I happen to think that this approach simply misses the point, and how, besides, do you come up with a plan or structure that does not inhibit their writing? Other than the very general one of introduction, body, and conclusion, there is none that I know of that does not set arbitrary limitations. Besides, there is the previously mentioned danger of students' favoring whatever pattern they have been shown, even if told that it is only one *possible* pattern, especially if they have used it with success.

Success with one possibility severely limits student imagination for considering other options. Say students use a pattern, however flexible, that they know well from experience; and say that they run into problems in structuring their ideas for an essay. Will they detour from the pattern? Unlikely. They will probably not know what to do. For example, a student uses the sequence of four main points for writing an essay on whether Macbeth is or is not a hero and then, later in the year, uses the same sequence for writing an essay on the very same question, but about Huck Finn. Will it work? Perhaps, perhaps not. A clever student can probably *make* it work, at least fairly well, but this adapting will demand shuffling the sequence of ideas. This student probably produces a weaker essay. More important, most students would simply be stymied at the point at which the apparently "right" pattern didn't work as well as it was supposed to. They would assume that the problem was their own fault. On the other hand, the students who believe that the pattern is something to be worked out each time will go

ahead and work out a new pattern to their essays.

Teachers do well to remind students often that the essay is an open form, that the logical development of the ideas determines the final form of the particular essay, and that there are often a number of ways to sequence ideas logically. Most convincing and helpful to students are examples of their own work. On the board, you could put the pattern one student used to respond to the Macbeth hero question, and next to it another student's pattern. The contrast makes for good discussion. So does the contrast between one of these patterns for the Macbeth hero question and the same pattern for the Huck Finn hero question. With these examples of logical development, the teacher can focus on how each pattern serves each essay's argument. The more patterns and applications of patterns students can be shown, the better, for a variety of models encourages them to experiment. This way they learn from their own writing, not just from theory, that the essay is a flexible mode. They learn too, firsthand, that as important as the sequencing of their ideas is, it is not enough in itself to determine a strong essay. There are other dimensions to this most formal of writing modes.

This student understanding has a constructive snowball effect. Students are likely to write more when the premium is placed on content, and more content contributes to better essays. An interest in one's ideas, plus a little success, goes a long way in breeding confidence and pride. Besides, students see quickly that an essay that is stronger for its content could be even stronger if the writing itself were improved. So they may even begin to proofread their essays. I'm convinced that proofreading improves their essays because not only does the student pick up on at least some of the technical miscues but also, in re-reading the paper, is attentive to the phrasing. Attention to phrasing addresses the first question of clear essay writing: does the sentence say what I mean? Sensitivity to exact transmission of intended meaning is, I believe, the greatest stride in expository writing a high school student can make. With this accomplishment goes the virtual guarantee that no otherwise strong essay will be ruined by vague, bland phrasing, convoluted sentence structure, or one careless little mistake after another.

In short, what begins with the assurance to students that the essay is a flexible mode of writing can lead to major improvement in all aspects of essay writing. This success allows students to feel comfortable with the essay. They learn from their experience that the essay is a good way to express their ideas. This ease is necessary if students are to take on—with pleasure, we hope—demanding essay questions about difficult works of literature.

Writing and Body Language

Reading Your Students' Gestures

by Bill Bernhardt

IN MY EVERYDAY READING OF PRINTED MATTER the text is everything. The images called to mind by the words on the page, the voice I seem to hear echoed in the cadences of the sentences, and whatever other features I attribute to "the writer" are all of my own invention. They are produced by my own acts of conjecture and speculation in response to those black squiggles on the white paper.

Under the circumstances of ordinary reading, "the writer" is a figment of my imagination. Based on what I read into the text or find stated or implied there, I see him as male or female, old or young, fat or skinny, straight or stooped. But I really don't know if this person exists or what he or she is actually like except when, as in the writing of friends, long acquaintance brings remembered images, associations, and echoes as an overlay on whatever the page provides.

When I come to consider what it means to read what my college students have written, I have to acknowledge a different reality:

- "The writer" is a person, known to me, whose heard speaking voice reverberates in the words I see on the page.
- Because I see each paper develop through various stages of composition and revision, I always perceive the finished product with a dual consciousness of what it is now and what it was at previous steps in its preparation.
- I know the writer's own perceptions of the writing process, as he or she has articulated them to me over a period of time, and the extent to which these perceptions mesh with his or her performance.
- Having often observed the writer at work, I have a context in which to place the finished product: I know the behaviors and states of mind that make each specific piece of work what it is.

In short, I don't—can't—read my students' work as texts in isolation from the unique persons and processes which produced them. I always read *both* the writer *and* the text.

Reading the writer and the text keeps me in touch with the actuality of writing as my students engage in it, and forces me to suspend abstractions such as "the student writer," "remedial composition," "prewriting," "grammar errors," etc. in order to see that Vinny and Bob and Terry and Jayne and Winston are all here in class today. As I observe them at work on an in-class writing assignment, what is happening can be expressed only in terms of what particular, individual writers are doing or not doing moment by moment. It isn't always possible for me to write down in my log what I see at the instant it happens, but at least I can make mental notes to be expanded later, when I think back over the class:

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Vinny is so concentrated on not making a mistake that he uses his pencil as an engraving tool and practically drives it through the paper; he is writing so slowly that I wonder if he can possibly remember the word immediately preceding the one he has just embossed so laboriously or notice whether the two together fit into a coherent phrase.

Jayne seems to be muttering to herself. No, it is more than that: she is moving rhythmically with the motion of her sentence the way some people on the street jog when they are in perfect sync with their Walkmans. Now I see her putting that same motion into her pen, which may account for that broad sprawling scrawl that covers her pages.

Terry is as still and stiff as a statue. Neither her hand nor her lips are moving. She is so sure she has nothing to say that she keeps her teeth clamped shut.

Bob and Winston are scribbling furiously. I look over their shoulders and see that they are transcribing in a sort of shorthand that ignores all of the ''litte words'' of English such as ''the,'' ''to,'' ''and,'' etc., as well as many of the final consonants and syllables of longer words.

Sometimes I find it useful to write along with the students, but more often than not my time seems better spent observing them at work and asking them questions to clarify what I see. The questioning is important because I can easily misread their outward behavior. At first I was assuming that Vinny crossed out and rewrote so many words because he couldn't focus on what he wanted to say. But when I asked him, he told me that he was eliminating all the words he couldn't spell. The questions need to be open-ended. Otherwise, I simply get the question back in statement form from the student, who assumes he or she is providing what the teacher wants.

Reading the students as they write and re-write, and bringing my memory of those observations to the scrutiny of their manuscripts later on, I am able to entertain questions and speculations that an ''objective'' analysis would never suggest. For example:

Have Vinny's papers, so full of mistakes, caused earlier teachers to advise him to ''be careful,'' with the result that an excess of care makes him more mistake-prone than ever? He is so attentive to words in isolation that he doesn't observe that they can change in context, it seems.

Jayne's way of flowing with what she wants to say functions perfectly at the moment of inspiration. Is she capable of suspending it when she is re-reading?

Is Terry so clenched and silent because of the quality of her writing or is the quality of her writing (what little there is) determined by her clenched silence? Don't I see a similar behavior in her speech, even with other students? Is it valid to say anything about her as long as she remains so withdrawn and uncommunicative?

Are Bob and Winston really as much alike as they seemed at first? They both leave out ''little words'' and neglect word endings, that is true. Still, I think I see some awareness in Winston of what is happening. Why does he raise his pen slightly above the paper at certain points and shake it nervously? Does this suggest he is half-consciously groping for something that he doesn't find? Bob simply charges ahead without noticing.

I keep a pad of paper handy so that I can jot down notes on anything or anybody in the class whenever I am struck by an observation that seems significant and likely to be forgotten if I don't get it down.

These readings of the student writers at work cannot be expressed in terms of the grammatical-linguistic-sociological-literary vocabulary ordinarily used to describe and analyze texts. I can't express what I see in Vinny by speaking of ''subject-verb agreement'' or describe what Terry is suffering in terms of ''dialect interference.'' Such phrases are less than useful because they focus purely on features of texts, ignoring what writers are doing with themselves. Or perhaps I should say that they are useful only if my aim is to change the paper and leave the writer alone.

My main aim in reading, whether it is texts or writers I am looking at, is to pose the kinds of questions that will help me decide what to do next with each individual student writer:

Could I ask Vinny to write with a ballpoint instead of a pencil? Would that change in instrumentation cause him to flow more and grind less? Could he experiment with writing all the words of a phrase before pausing?

Would it be possible for me to provoke Terry into expressing her anger (if that's what it is) instead of silence? Is there some topic or situation sufficiently outrageous from her point of view to shock her into language?

Could Jayne re-read one of her manuscripts while maintaining a rigid posture similar to Terry's? Could she watch herself and notice how different a state she needs to be in when she shifts from getting her words down on paper to checking over her work?

What if I were to break in when I saw Winston jiggle his pen and ask what he is thinking about at that instant? Would that put him in touch with the words or parts of words he is losing? Or would it only interrupt his flow?

Could I get Bob to slow down slightly to see whether he could still stay in contact with his meaning but not drop so many words and parts of words? Maybe it would help if he muttered each word to himself as he writes it down.

Many of these speculations and questions are only for myself as I try to select useful activities and assignments for the students to do. Some I share with the individual writers, either at the moment they strike me or in personal conferences later on. I find that most of the writers in my classes are willing to experiment and modify long-standing habits. But getting them to observe themselves and provide me with some immediate response just after they have tried something new is more difficult.

It is also hard to keep my flood of questions going when I have 25 students per class, when so many of my questions receive inconclusive answers, and when a number of the students themselves prefer me to mark their papers with red pencils the way other instructors do. However, I keep on trying to pursue this way of working. For one thing, it is much more interesting for me to read and respond to my students and not just to their writing. Reading papers objectively, that is, focusing on the text and ignoring the writer, is so often a monotonous business. One comma splice or run-on sentence is pretty much like any other. But reading with both the student and his or her text before me allows for more mystery, idiosyncracy, and uniqueness. Each person in the class becomes more distinct and memorable.

The results are necessarily varied:

> Vinny has loosened up a lot; he produces results that are more connected and coherent. Still, there are lots of mistakes in his work. He notices his weaknesses and is discouraged, whereas I am more encouraged by how far he has come.
>
> Jayne has grasped that she has to be a different kind of person when she edits than when she composes. She is now able to separate and maintain each of these so that they don't interfere with each other.
>
> Terry's progress is glacial but something is happening so that she trusts herself more and produces longer manuscripts.
>
> Winston seems very much in the same place. I haven't yet found the suggestion that he needs.
>
> Bob is talking out his words as he sets them down on paper. This enables him to hold more of the little words and even to catch himself dropping the endings off words.

So far I have been talking from a teacher's point of view, which leaves out an important question: how do the students feel about this way of working? Their responses to this question suggest that they like being a focus of attention no less important than their papers. My preoccupation with reading them also has the effect of making them more willing to observe themselves as writers. So they are gradually less inclined to look for answers to their writing problems through the mistakes on their papers. Now they also think about what they are doing with themselves as they write. They too are learning to read *both* the writer *and* the text. As Terry wrote in a piece of advice to herself:

> Listen in your mind to yourself...Also think about the things you heard and know about from your own experience to help you. Don't go let your mind wander off to another subject of thought. Relax your mind and body from those nerve tense feelings you're beginning to have more and more as your thoughts begin to wander on to how much time it's going to be before you have to stop and how much more you have to write to get to the botttom of the page and on to the back of it...You've lost enough time at the beginning thinking what you were going to say so don't take any more time trying to figure out how to spell a word correct.
>
> Don't leave it blank there, put another word in there that will fit what you're going to say.

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