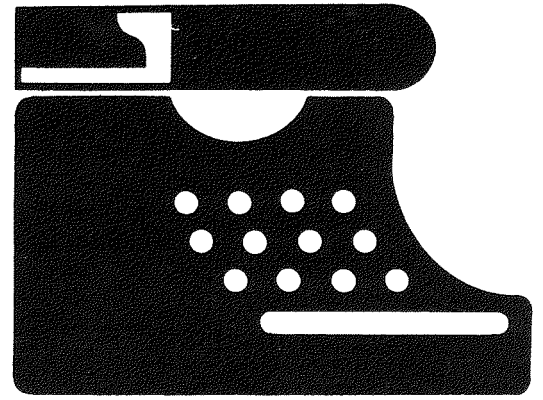


Teachers & Writers



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SECRET WRITING

Keys to the Mysteries of Reading & Writing

by Peter Sears

MY BOOK *SECRET WRITING: KEYS TO THE MYSTERIES of Reading and Writing* grew out of years of teaching English and wondering about how to interest students in language: I have long been convinced that *the way language is made* should be the fundamental subject of an English course. Most textbooks, unfortunately, are not written to interest students in how language is made. Instead, English textbooks state and demonstrate the principles of proper English usage. They are basically reference books with exercises. I wanted to do an interesting textbook about language, with English at its center.

I scrambled about, borrowing from here and there and inventing some exercises of my own. I found that my students responded to language-making exercises because the activity touches their imaginations. The best of these exercises were related to specific examples. These examples required some figuring out, before inventing one's own language system. Thus the basic idea of my book: decipher the language example and then invent one's own system.

Collecting good exercises and doing a sensible book are two very different matters. This I learned the hard way, through one false start after another. Thanks, though, to help from both teachers and students, I managed to assemble what I like to think is a sequence natural to student thinking.

The sequence begins with secret writing. Students like codes and ciphers. I use secret writing to demonstrate how regular writing works: codes and ciphers reveal the foundation of English.

The second part of the book presents the elements of this foundation of English (and other languages, for that matter). These elements of language I call "conventions." The five

conventions of written language are 1) a series of basic elements (such as an alphabet); 2) a notion of spacing; 3) use of direction; 4) establishing meaning through sequencing; and 5) signalling devices (punctuation) for further clarifying of meaning. I show that by altering these conventions one can disguise meaning, creating codes and ciphers. Contrariwise, one can communicate clearly by following these conventions.

The third part of the book uses this knowledge of the five conventions of language to figure out hard passages in literature, from the Middle English of Chaucer to the experimental modern writing of Joyce and Cummings. These exercises provide deciphering challenges for the reader, not abstract literary theories.

The fourth part of the book is an examination of other kinds of language. In it I apply the five conventions of language to systems of numbers and picture writing, to see if they are languages too. Traffic signs, cave paintings, and comic books are among the surprising subjects of these chapters.

This leads to the final part of the book, about sending a message into outer space—an interesting issue of language that students take to readily. Students examine the messages we have already sent out and then decide on their own messages. Before inventing their own, however, they have quite

PETER SEARS' new book *Secret Writing* has just been published by T&W. A poet and teacher, he is currently working with the Oregon Arts Commission.

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a challenge in deciphering the messages sent out by scientists.

However far the book's subject matter may range, the central question throughout is how people create a means to communicate reliably. The book is laced with exercises in deciphering and language making, the breaking and making of language, with the emphasis on the systematic nature of language. Whatever exercises I ask the students to do, I do too—or say why I don't. I respond to the exercises not as a distant, objective authority, but as a student might, with everything from enthusiasm to utter frustration. I participate like this, directly, to encourage students to participate, to encourage them to engage their own ideas fully.

As long as students regard language as a rigid body of opaque, restrictive rules, they're not going to be very interested. But draw them into seeing language as something that people created and that they themselves can also create, and their attitude toward the study of English will change dramatically.

To give you a better idea of how all this works, here are the opening pages of *Secret Writing*, addressed, as the entire book is, directly to students.

Hangman

Have you ever met a person who makes and breaks codes? I haven't. At least I don't think I have. But you know, if you were a professional codemaker or codebreaker and somebody asked you what you did for a living, you probably wouldn't say. You might not be allowed to, and you might not want to. Perhaps you would dodge the question by replying, "Oh, I work for a company" or "I work for the government." Your job might involve guarding valuable information. You might have the responsibility of conveying valuable information to key people.

Exercise 1

Imagine you are a professional codemaker and a company hires you to protect a valuable formula. How would you do it and what would you want to know in order to maximize protection? •
(Think of your answer before you read mine.)

My response to Exercise 1

I would make up a code, memorize it, enter the formula in code in a computer under a false heading, and tell as few people at the company as possible. How to maximize protection beyond that would depend on all sorts of things about the company.

I had thought that people who work with codes just tried out different ideas to make a code or to break a code. Then I found out that these people have their tools, like everybody else. One tool the codebreaker has is the Frequency Table. This "table" lists how frequently the letters of the alphabet appear in words. I can't imagine how many words must be used to figure out the sequence of most frequently used letters of the alphabet, but there really is such a list.

I learned about the Frequency Tables the hard way. Do you know the game of Hangman? If you don't know the rules, here they are. It takes two people to play Hangman. One person thinks of a word of at least six letters and which is not a name. This person draws the same number of spaces

as there are letters in the word—for example, for the word "hockey" six spaces, as well as a gallows, above the spaces:

— — — — — **I**

The other person starts guessing letters, one at a time. If the guess is correct, the person who knows the word puts the letter in the right place—for example, the guess *E*:

— — — — — **E** —

If the person guessing says a letter that is *not* in the word, the other person draws a leg. Another wrong guess means another leg. Then the wrong guesses go: body, one arm, the other arm, the neck and, finally, the head. That means hanged. So the person guessing letters has to guess all the letters, or the word itself, before guessing seven wrong letters, because the seventh letter is the head.

When a friend of mine asked me if I wanted to play Hangman, I knew only that it was a word-guessing game. I said, "Sure." My friend said, "Give me a really hard word, one that I don't know the meaning of, and make it as long as you want. I bet you I can guess it."

No way, I figured. I picked a long word I found in the dictionary: **CONCATENATION**, which means "a linked series or chain." I was sure he wouldn't guess it. I made the thirteen spaces for the letters.

My friend guessed six letters before he guessed a letter *not* in the word. I couldn't believe it! He guessed in order, *E T A O I N*. So he had

— **O** — **N** — **A** — **T** — **E** — **N** — **A** — **T** — **I** — **O** — **N** —

All he had to guess was the *C* and he would have it. But he didn't know the word, so how could he guess the right letter?

He guessed *S* and got a leg. He guessed *R* and got another leg. He guessed, in order, *H, L, and D*. All wrong. He had two legs, the body, and two arms. If he missed again, he would have the neck—and one more miss after that would mean he was hanged.

He guessed *C*. He won. I was mystified.

Later he told me about the Frequency Table. Here it is. The letters are listed in the order of their frequency. A group of letters means that the frequency of the letters is approximately the same.

E T A O N I S R H L D C U F P M W Y B G K Q X J Z

Knowing the Frequency Table was only half of my friend's trick. The other half was to trick me into giving him a *long* word to guess.

Exercise 2

Can you see why a long word makes the Frequency Table more valuable? •

My response to Exercise 2

The longer the word, the more chances there are for the most common letters to appear.

It was my turn. I had the sequence of letters my friend had guessed, but when I asked him to give me a word, I forgot to specify a *long* word. He gave me a six-letter word. I guessed as he had, in order, *E T A O I N*. The fourth letter was *T*. None of the other letters was in the word. I had two legs, the

body, and two arms. Two more wrong guesses and I was hanged. I guessed *R*. The first letter was *R*.

R T _ _

Exercise 3

What letter do you think I should have guessed next? •

My response to Exercise 3

My friend had guessed *H*, *L*, and *D* before guessing *C*, but should I guess these consonants when I hadn't yet established the vowel or vowels? No, I figured. I guessed *U*.

No *U*. I didn't know what to do. I guessed *D*. No *D*. I was hanged. Can you guess the word? If I had been lucky and guessed *H* instead of *D*, I would have had

R H _ T H _

Exercise 4

Now what would you guess? •

The word is "rhythm." My friend had stumped me with a simple word. At least it sounds simple. It is easy to say and it is a common word. But its spelling isn't simple at all.

Exercise 5

What word do you think would be hard? It has to have at least six letters and may not be a name like "Dallas" or "Melvin." •

My response to Exercise 5

A word that looks simple but might be hard is "through." It is short, has only one syllable, and the letter combinations are tricky, I think. However, the letters are pretty common.

Exercise 6

What word do you think looks like it would be hard because it is uncommon and long, but, with the help of the Frequency Table, might not be hard at all? •

My response to Exercise 6

You already know the word I came up with: "concatenation."

Playing Hangman is like trying to break a code. Hangman is easier, though, because the other person has to tell you if the letter you guess is in the word and has to put the letter in the right place if it is. If you are trying to break a code, no one tells you if you are right or wrong. Instead, you have to try new ideas. If you get a possible solution to a word, then you try out the letters in other words. Also you may have other information that will help you.

For example, let's say you intercept a coded message that appears to be a six-letter word, and you have reason to believe that the word is the name of a major city in the Northeast. In looking at the coded word, you see that the second letter and the fifth letter are the same. So you have:

 _ _ _ _ _ _

 ↙ same ↘

Exercise 7

What do you think the word is? •

My response to Exercise 7

There is a pretty good chance that the word is "Boston."

The word is composed of the letters *B*, *O*, *S*, *T*, and *N*. Most of these letters are pretty common, high up in the Frequency Table. If you have enough other messages in this code to establish what you think is a fairly reliable frequency sequence, then you can see if the first letter of the coded word (*B*, here) is fairly uncommon, at least in comparison to the others.

A professional codebreaker has a list of the frequency of the letters of the alphabet and also lists of the frequency of certain combinations of letters.

Exercise 8

Can you think of a common combination of letters? •

My response to Exercise 8

Common combinations of letters are "ing," "tion," and "ed." Knowing common letter combinations and the Frequency Table helps a professional codemaker invent a good code. For example, if the codemaker wants to enter a valuable formula in a computer under a key word, the codemaker would be smart to pick a word that is not easily guessed. A good word might be one that does not include common letters or common letter combinations. The seven most common letters are, as you know from the Frequency Table, *E T A O N I S*. Let's rule these out, along with the three most common letter combinations, and think of a word to be the key word for the codemaker.

Exercise 9

Would ruling out the seven most common letters also rule out the three most common letter combinations? •

My response to Exercise 9

Yes, ruling out the seven most common letters would rule out the three most common letter combinations because each of the three letter combinations includes at least one of the seven most common letters.

Exercise 10

Can you think of three words of at least six letters that do not include any of the seven most common letters? •

My response to Exercise 10

Three such words are "church," "chubby," and "frumpy."

Does "frumpy" count? Is it in the dictionary? I'm not sure—but I don't want to check because I don't know if I can think of another word. With only *u* of the vowels (I'm not counting *y*), finding a word with these letters is hard. I guess this is the kind of information that codemakers discover quickly.

Still, wouldn't it be great to be able to hide messages! Finding a word for entering a valuable formula on a computer is one thing. What I would like better is to be able to send a message to a friend so that no other people could read it, even if they found it. I am not as interested in hiding as I am in disguising my meaning. How about you? Have you ever fooled around with secret writing? Have you and a friend ever invented a code so that you could exchange messages without anyone else knowing what you are saying?

Exercise 11

What would you use secret writing for? You don't have to say. Just think about it. •

That is what the next chapter is about, secret writing.

Secret Writing

Can you read this?

TEEM EM TA HCNUL

Reading it forwards doesn't make sense. How about reading it backwards?

LUNCH AT ME MEET

This doesn't make sense either, but we are getting somewhere. We now have four words. Just the sequence of words doesn't make sense. Can we make sense out of the four words by rearranging the sequence?

Maybe you just look at the four words and come up with a sensible sequence. Maybe you try out all the possible combinations. One way or the other, you are going to come upon the possibility

MEET ME AT LUNCH

You have not only solved the problem, but you have also confirmed a fact of the English language: English reads from left to right. That is obvious to you. Yet that is not true of all languages. In the next chapter we are going to look more into what codemaking tells us about the English language.

For now, let's look again at the secret message TEEM EM TA HCNUL. To hide the meaning of the message, the code-maker simply reversed the order of letters in each word. That's all. Nothing else.

Exercise 12

Can you think of another way to make the message secret? •

My response to Exercise 12

Another way to make the message secret is to write all the words together.

You probably thought of this way and other ways, too. If you write the words together, you would have

TEEMEMTAHCNUL

That's certainly harder to read, and in using this idea we confirm another fact about the English language: we indicate the end of a word by leaving a space before beginning the next word. This fact is obvious too.

Another way to make the message harder to read is to make up another alphabet and write the message in this new alphabet.

A B C D E F G H I J K L M N O P Q R S T U V W X Y Z
R M G K Z J Q C W E P Y B U T H L A V X D N I F O S

In my new alphabet the secret message looks like this:

X Z Z B Z B X R C G U D Y

That is harder to read than the way it was before.

Exercise 13

Make up your own secret alphabet and write the message in it with all the reversed-spelled words written together. •

Let's summarize what we have done to make the message MEET ME AT LUNCH hard to read:

1. Reversed the order of the letters in each word;
2. Written the words together;
3. Written the message in an invented alphabet.

What we have done may be, in your opinion, not very complicated, but pretend you don't know our method. Would you be able to figure out the meaning? I couldn't.

Just for the fun of it, read your coded message aloud a few times. Pretend, as you say it aloud, that it really is *your* language, the language you speak all the time. Notice how this makes you "feel" different.

Now say the message in English. Can you describe how it "feels" to speak English, your own language?

Notice, by the way, that in normal talk we don't leave spaces between the words, the way we do when we write. Why don't we leave spaces between words when we talk?

Finally, when you said the coded message aloud, did it remind you of a foreign language? Which one? Or does it make you think of a language from outer space?

We have written a secret message. You might call it a coded message. Many people think of code as the way to make a message secret, and code is the word we use for any secret writing. Actually, though, there are three ways to make a message secret: code, cipher, and stenography.

Stenography is the hiding or concealing of a message. Invisible ink is a method of stenography. Have you ever used "invisible ink"? It's easy. Instead of regular ink, use lemon juice or milk. When it's dry, heat the paper over a flame or light bulb (but be careful that you don't burn yourself or the paper). The heat will cause what you've written to emerge, in brown letters.

Another way to write invisibly is with a typewriter. Insert a piece of paper with a piece of carbon paper on top. Type directly onto the back of the carbon paper. What you type will appear on the paper, but you won't be able to read it until you take it out of the machine and remove the carbon sheet.

A third way to write invisibly is with a word processor. Of course you have to know how to use the word processor first. To write invisibly with it, just turn off the monitor, so you won't be able to peek at what you've written.

Exercise 14

Using any of these three methods, try an experimental writing technique called "freewriting." There is only one rule for freewriting: write as fast as you can, nonstop, for a set period of time, such as five minutes. You can write *anything*, as long as it's words and you keep going without stopping. Don't worry about spelling or neatness or grammar. Just try to make your hand write words as quickly as your mind thinks them.

When you've finished, bring out the invisible writing by heating up the invisible ink, by taking the carbon sheet off, or by turning the monitor on. •

Are there any words you didn't remember writing? Did you write anything you didn't expect to write? If the answer is yes, it shows that you are able to write things you didn't know you could, things that were "hidden" from you. •

This article is an excerpt from Peter Sears' *Secret Writing: Keys to the Mysteries of Reading & Writing*, just published by T&W. It is available in single copies for \$10.95 (bulk orders of 20 or more copies are \$8.95 each). Paperback, 200 pp.

DANCING & WRITING

Choreographic Phrase & Writing

by Andrea Sherman

WE ENCOURAGE ARTICULATION AS A TOOL for self-expression and self-respect in our students, but by “articulation” do we mean verbal articulation only? English teachers tend to forget that various students learn through various modes: visual, auditory, tactile, olfactory, as well as intellectual. Some students’ primary mode of learning is verbal, but for others it is rhythmic or visceral (often referred to as the “kinesthetic response”).

For example, I remember in science class trying to understand the solar system and planetary rotation. I really did not grasp this conceptually, but if the teacher had had us students dance the rotation, my body and its physical memory would have remembered the concept—an imprint would have been made through my body onto my mind. Much of my education in school did not reach me because it was not physical or reinforced by movement. We were made to sit still in order to learn.

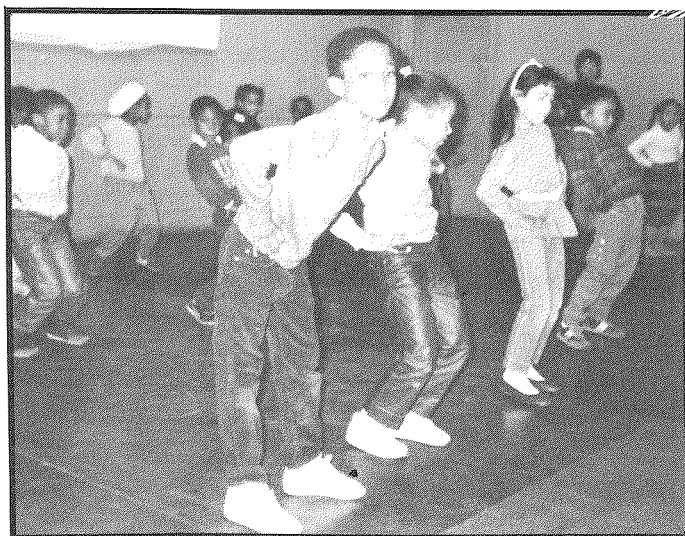
The idea of comparing a phrase in dance and one in writing is intriguing because it provides a point of departure for both choreographers and writing teachers. What I am suggesting is that it is possible to take the idea of making a phrase and to present it in two different ways to students. Some students will respond to the written form and some to the physical, and perhaps some to both.

A verbal phrase is defined as “a sequence of words intended to have meaning, expression.” In dance it is defined as “a series of movements forming a unit in a choreographic pattern.” In both cases there is great freedom of expression, a more open-ended feeling than that of a sentence or a completed choreography.

Choreographic phrases are process-oriented: making phrases does not necessarily mean producing finished dances, any more than making verbal phrases means making complete stories. In teaching choreography to students, the following elements can go into making a phrase: level, counts, shape, gesture, tempo, theme, body part, prop, mask, character, music, word, accent, dynamic, direction, motivation, and design.

One of the elements more accessible to younger students is the element of design. It encompasses *shape* (the visible make-up, or spatial form), *level* (position of movement in space, e.g., high in the air or low near the ground), and *direction* (the line one moves in: forward, to the side, etc.). I

often combine these elements with those of *tempo* (rhythm, or time sense of the movement), *accent* (heightening or giving emphasis to a movement, as in 1-2-3-*accent*), and *dynamic* (the variation of intensity or energy). By the way, don’t worry if you can’t keep all this straight: described in words, even the simplest movement appears to be more complicated than it is.



Warming up

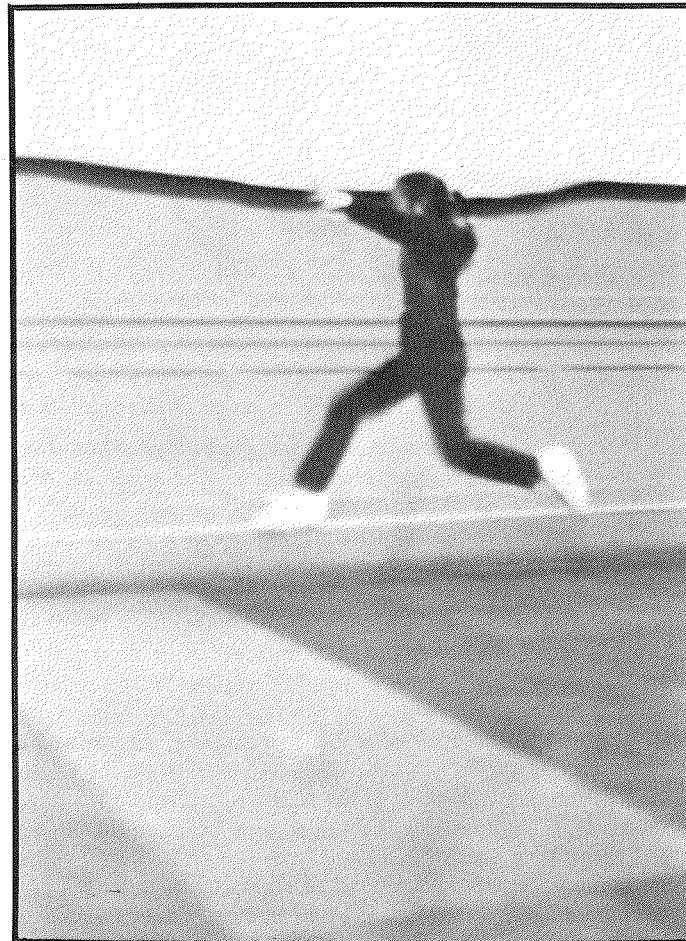
In learning about phrases, a typical dance class should start with a warm-up, preferably with music. Warm-ups not only stretch and strengthen the body, but also prevent injuries, and give us a technical vocabulary with which to dance. Warm up the body from head to toe. There are many kinds of warm-ups, such as modern dance, jazz, aerobic, ballet, martial arts, and yoga, but they all involve getting the blood moving and gently stretching the muscles. It is important to have a reasonable warm-up for children that considers their limited physical abilities.

After the warm-up I have two “volunteers” (a boy and a girl) come to the front of the class to demonstrate the concept of the dance phrase. In the following example I’ll have them combine *level*, *counts*, and *shape*. I explain that by *level* I mean how near or far away from the ground a movement is; that each student has a total of eight *counts* to do his or her movement; that at count 1 one student begins making any bodily *shape* that is low to the ground while the other begins high in the air. During the eight counts both students can move to any level and make any shape, but by the count of 8 both students must be back in their original positions.

ANDREA SHERMAN is a director, choreographer, and dance teacher. She is a doctoral student at NYU and has taught dance for T&W for three years.



Level, with counts



Dancing the exclamation point

These movements can also be done in small groups so that the students can communicate with each other as they invent their phrases. The phrase is a good choreographic unit for the classroom insofar as it does not require the sustained complexity of a finished piece of choreography, and yet it has a satisfying wholeness and sense of completion. It is a fragment, but a whole fragment.

The relation between dance and words can be introduced by having students dance—in order of increasing difficulty—verbs (*stagger, hop, sway, grow, burst*), nouns (*wind, sea, fireworks, spaghetti*), and adjectives (*warm, old, leisurely, gentle*). From there it's but a small step to dancing out prepositions (or "space words") such as *onto, into, over, and under*. It is easier to use these grammatical elements as examples, before combining them in various kinds of phrases. The prepositional phrase is ideal for translating into dance.

Another parallel between dance and writing is the use of punctuation. In dance a jump may be an exclamation point, a rocking gesture may be a comma, a half turn may be a dash. These can be used for stringing groups of phrases together.

Prepositional phrases can also be used as the sound score for a dance (to be recited aloud during the dance), either parallel to their corresponding dance phrases or in a random sequence. The prepositional phrases can be created before or after the dance phrases.

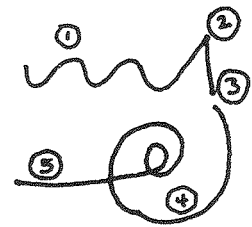
Here are some other ideas for combining dance and words:

- *Alphabet*: Have each student form a letter of the alphabet with his or her own body. Then have two or three students make a letter together. To vary the exercise, have two students spell a long word with their bodies while the other students try to "read" the word.

- *Noun game*: Pick a compound phrase with nouns, such as "trees and a hammock." Then have students use their bodies to construct the scene described in the phrase.

- *Choreographic language*: There have been many systems of dance notation. Make up a new system, using your own symbols, dance punctuation, terminology, etc. From it make a movement score, using, if you wish, line drawing and words. Number the sequence of the movements. For example:

1. Curve
2. Jump
3. Land from the jump
4. Spiral
5. Glide



- *Body language game*: Have students draw a body language word (such as *young, old, nervous, relaxed, cold, hot, angry, and sad*) from a hat and dance it out. The other students guess what it is.

(The students in the photographs on pp. 5-7 are first graders in Sandra Wilde's class at P.S. 91 in Brooklyn, N.Y.)

Phrases in Grammar & Dance

by Ron Padgett

I'VE ALWAYS LIKED PREPOSITIONAL PHRASES. IN school it was relatively easy for me to learn what they were and to diagram them. In the house. Under the bed. Over the rainbow. There were no horrible complications of voice, mood, or agreement. And the diagrammatic structure for prepositional phrases was so crisp and neat: a line slanting down to the right, then turning to run horizontally.



I think that when I was first taught diagramming, in the seventh or eighth grade, this graphic depiction caused me to associate prepositional phrases and human arms (or legs): the preposition was the upper arm (or leg above the knee), the noun object the forearm (or leg below the knee). In fact it was as if an entire sentence, its structure laid bare in diagramming, mirrored the human body. The subject corresponded to the head, the predicate to the trunk, the arms and legs to prepositional phrases. (I can't remember if I extended the comparison as far as conjunctions/genitals, though given my willingness at thirteen to see sexual connotations in everything, it's possible that I did. I'm sure I dimly felt the main clause to be male, the dependent clause female.) Such associations have a visual as well as psychological basis: relating sentence diagramming to the human body came naturally—after learning to draw the traditional stick figure.

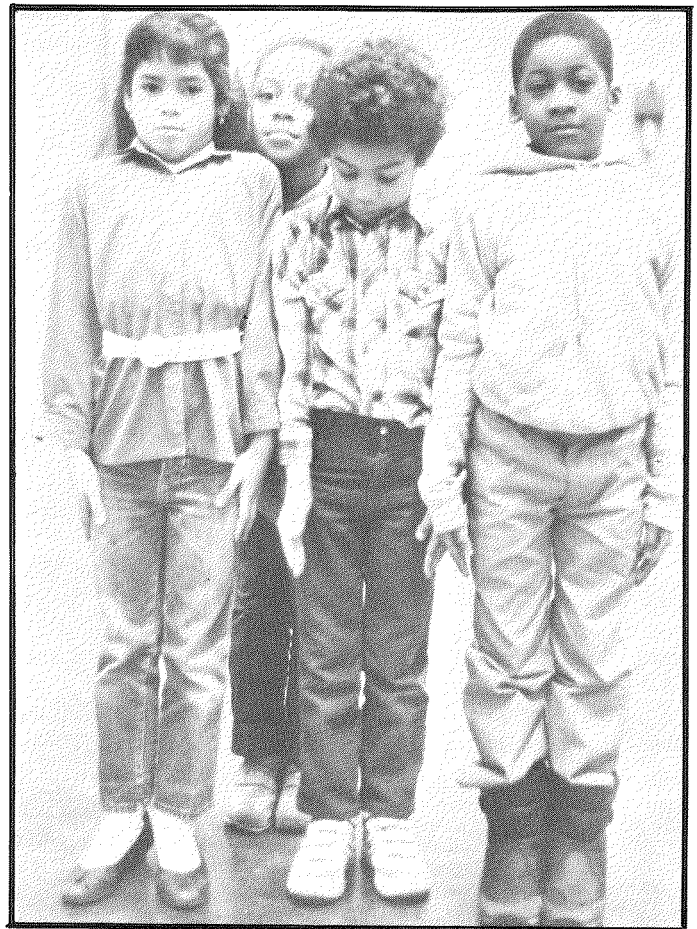


Prepositional phrases still not only remind me of arms and legs, they also give me a visceral sensation of motion, at least when they're concrete. "Under the ground" drives me lower, "across the river" whizzes me forward, "in the sky" elevates me—and not only because of content. "Under" has a Germanic sound that seems to attract other such sounds, guttural and heavy. The two syllables of "across" are like the two steps for shooting a projectile: the first syllable cocks the mechanism, the second is the sound of the projectile whizzing through the air. "In" is so small a word as to be lighter than air, calling forth other airy sounds, clusters of helium balloons.

The physiology of uttering these three prepositions reinforces their respective impressions. Say them aloud now: "under," "across," "in." "Under" begins low in the throat and ends by being pressed down by the tongue and lips. "Across" begins in the back of the mouth and then is hissed outward into the air. The short *i* of "in" rises to the long (and "high") *i* sound in "sky": it rises. Perhaps this is why the image of balloons came to mind a few sentences back.

In any case, such concrete prepositional phrases make me feel—perhaps where mind and body meet—the actual motion suggested by the phrases. Combined with appropriate rhythms, these phrases become powerful vehicles: by the time we get to "we go" in "Over the river and through the woods to grandmother's house we go," I've already gone!

The movement inherent in concrete prepositional phrases can be seen by contrasting them with abstract ones. "In this case," "of the agreement," "in my opinion" have rhythm (as any words do), but they are static. They are plunked right down where they are. Perhaps this is why people who wish to appear dignified, firm, and stately overuse such phrases. Built into their usage is the prejudice that to move one's body quickly is usually to appear juvenile. Children run and jump. Heads of state move with studied slowness. Middle-aged women seek youthfulness by jumping about in aerobics classes. I jump around on a tennis court. No wonder we get drowsy and doze when hearing a talk bogged down in phrases like "under consideration," "in deliberation," and "of achievement." An old meaning of *abstract* is, after all, "absent in mind."



"Behind the door"

RON PADGETT is Publications Director at T&W.

Of course abstraction has its uses. The unfortunate thing about abstraction is that its *abuses* don't lead to anything beautiful or interesting. For example, disorganized strings of concrete phrases can be wonderfully ludicrous, as in "The Browns returned this morning from their vacation in the mountains on a bus," in which the suddenly miniature Browns spend their leisure time amidst the little mountains situated atop a bus. In this example the scale of things fluctuates wildly, releasing a surrealistic humor. By seeing the imaginative possibilities in such ludicrousness, creative writers can use confused strings of prepositional phrases to good advantage.

I've always been attracted to the lankiness of long strings of prepositional phrases: "in the city of Cincinnati under an enormous elm in the summer of 1942. . . ." This series of phrases generously opens up and extends itself, like a carpenter's rule. It has a midsummer sense of timelessness built into its syntax. It exudes ease and flow and relaxation, something like the rhythm of using the extra "and" in the first half of this very sentence. Carried to extremes, such lankiness can create elongations that, like Giacometti sculptures, instill in us a new but oddly familiar mood: "in the light of the moon in my bed at midnight in the late summer in Oslo." Pushed far enough, some mysterious or at least amusing image emerges, not despite the confusion, but because of it. The moon gets in bed with you.

Other types of phrases—verb phrases, participial, gerundive, and infinitive phrases—don't have for me the strong physiological associations that prepositional phrases do. Verb phrases are really just verbs, no? Participial phrases are perpetual motion machines: the *-ing* keeps them going forever. Gerund phrases are perpetual motion machines that stopped and became frozen in noun form. Infinitive phrases are Platonic versions of verbs and their accoutrements. Also, these all lack the attractive simplicity and particularity of direction of prepositional phrases.

A phrase of an entirely different order, the dangling phrase, sometimes has a comic effect similar to that of the misplaced prepositional phrase, as in "Being in a hurry to leave Denver, the dented fender was not repaired then." Dangling phrases are reminiscent of the comic dislocations of what the Germans call *Grotesktanz*, or "eccentric dancing," and of the consciously misplaced and witty phrases of contemporary dance choreography.

So much for the confused, misplaced, comic, or surreal phrase. What about the graceful, articulate, adroit use of phrases? What about the periodic sentence that flows from beginning to end like a big river? Is it not related to the classical ballet, its 19th-century counterpart?

The graceful dancer has (too) often been described as "poetry in motion." This is flattering to the dancer, at the expense of poetry, for what it overlooks is that poetry already has motion. It does, though, refer to the relation we feel between poetry and dance. The phrase in writing and the phrase in dance don't seem all that different to me. Given the somewhat grammatical structure of dance and the kinetic nature of syntax, it might be useful to see how they could strengthen and develop each other (something like the "body syntonicity" Seymour Papert discusses in his book *Mindstorms*).

Here are some exercises toward that end:

1A. Have each student invent a dance phrase: a brief gesture or movement of any type, using any part(s) of the body.

1B. Then have the student write down a prepositional phrase suggested by the dance phrase.

Note: Prepositions involving directions (*behind, under, through, around*, etc.) are the most physical. E.g., a student whose dance phrase involves taking a backward step might write the corresponding "behind the bear."

2. Do the same as in 1, but reverse the order: prepositional phrases first, dance versions of them second.

Note: "Abstract" prepositions (*of, at, by, for*, etc.) are more challenging to translate into dance phrases.

3. Have three or four students perform their dance phrases at the front of the class, as their classmates "read" them from left to right and translate them into prepositional phrases that read consecutively.

4. Same as above, only reverse the order: have students read aloud a string of three or four prepositional phrases and have a corresponding three or four students at the front spontaneously translate them into dance phrases. ●

Yak and Yak

by Ron Padgett

I am saying
that grammar is the direct result of how humans feel in
the world;
or rather,
that grammar follows from what we experience viscerally
and punctuation keeps it that way;
that for instance, people walking down the street
are forming various sentences with their bodies,
and as the schoolgirl turns the corner the meaning
changes, oh so naturally. Just so the wind
that suddenly turns the corner has just blown your hair off!
You go indoors and write,
"The wind has blown my hair away,"
then shift your weight and add, "almost."
For in your mind your arms have stretched to catch your head,
in which Pig Latin is understood but Dog not.
"Omecay erehay, etlay emay elltay ouyay omethingsay at
they ouyay ughtoay otay owknay."
In Hawaiian countries there was a battle over there,
anyhow, and when she heard the racket and the battle
of the fierce pineapples clashing under a warm moon,
she wrote across the sky, with her magic finger,
in glowing light, that she would not love her man anymore.
The palm trees stood like so many silent exclamation points
in the flowing beat of the night's heart. ●



BOOKS



The Art of Teaching Writing
by Lucy McCormick Calkins
(Heinemann Educational Books, 1986)
\$16.00 paperback, 350 pp.

by Lucia Nevai

I feel like grabbing my teacher friends by the hand and reading them page 25 of Lucy Calkins' new book *The Art of Teaching Writing*, the way I used to grab a friend by the hand and play the new Dylan song:

"I urge teachers to set aside an hour a day, every day, for the writing workshop," she writes. "It is almost impossible to create an effective writing workshop if students write only once or twice a week. . . . I also recommend that writing time be scheduled regularly so that children can anticipate it. . . . [This] is important for another reason: it allows children to take control of their own writing processes."

Why is this recommendation music to my ears? That regularly scheduled work time is useful to the craft of writing we have long been told by professionals. Philip Roth says he writes an hour a day, minimum, wherever he is. Even in the last stages of her illness, Flannery O'Connor put in her daily three-hour stint at the typewriter. And yet, if Roth or O'Connor told teachers that students should follow a similar work pattern, the suggestion would not have the compelling authority it does when Calkins speaks. Why?

Lucy Calkins' inductions result from practicing three disciplines. She is a writer (*Lessons from a Child* and twenty-five articles on teaching writing), a teacher (at elementary and secondary levels as well as teacher training), and a researcher (working with many school districts and directing The Writing Project through Columbia University Teacher's College.) You can feel her background in the integrity of her approach. She respects and understands the writing process as much as she respects and understands the development of learning capacities in children—and she has the evidence, facts, and anecdotes to back up her opinions.

The subject areas she addresses in this thirty-chapter book include the motivation to write, the changing capacities of growing children to write, the various writing forms (non-fiction, fiction, poetry), the child/child relationship in the writing workshop, the teacher/child relationship, the connection between reading and writing, and the importance of it all.

In Section One, "The Essentials in Teaching Writing," she suggests that a teacher can tap the desire and energy to write

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in children by making writing personal, by using the child's own "concerns, ideas, memories and feelings." My only complaint with this is that it's too limited: the personal connection is only one of many that can be established between children and their writing. Other connections (ones that would stand up in other eras when other psycho-social trends might even invalidate such celebration of the individual) include the desire to lie, show off, solve a problem, create a fantasy world, make order, investigate a subject, and understand something entirely outside one's personal experience. Each of these can be seen as a point of entry to writing; once entered, of course, a piece of writing can have many simultaneous purposes. The desire to make order can overlap with the desire to show off; both can easily overlap with the connection Calkins has currently isolated as a widely applicable, highly motivating point of entry: the personal event that needs to be told, needs to be heard.

Once motivated, children need to be reminded how to be comfortable with the process of writing, the stages of development that accompany the birth of any idea into language. Calkins adopts Donald Murray's terms for the stages of the writing process: (1) rehearsal, (2) drafting, (3) revision, and (4) editing. She points out that the steps do not occur in sequence, but that writers—both the professional writer and the schoolchild-writer—are always shifting back and forth between the steps. In my experience teaching writing, this is true as early as fourth grade: drafting a story may entail inserting more explanatory details (revising), correcting spelling (editing), and jotting down a note in the margin for another idea to be covered (rehearsal). "For me it is helpful," Calkins writes, "to think of writing as a process of dialogue between the writer and the emerging text."

Flannery O'Connor said it her own way: "I never know what I think until I read what I wrote"—yet the opinions of writers on writing can't be taken to heart by teachers in quite the same way that Lucy Calkins' opinions can.

Which brings us to the impressive core of the book, based both on the developmental research and on hours and hours of classroom observation: the chapters on "How Children Change As Writers," delineating what each age group can and cannot achieve from kindergarten through adolescence. Samples of student writing accompany each assertion; anecdotes from the classroom support the claims of the research and exemplify the writing processes of children. "The teacher of writing must be a student of students," Calkins says later in the book, though she proves it here. Her goal is inspiring in its simplicity, challenging in its difficulty: the writing teacher should extend what children do as writers. Thus the teacher must know the writing process (rehearsal, drafting, revision, editing) and what each age group and individual can do with the process—and *then* push each individual ever so lightly for *more*.

We learn that kindergartners and first graders may want to "rehearse" for "drafting" by drawing—not only do they draw with greater facility than they write, but they imbued meaning in their drawings, which they can refer to when struggling with the letters and words that also tell their story. One piece of research I particularly envy is the observation that "it was when children began drawing their figures in profile that the biggest breakthrough into narrative seemed to occur. Now horses could be led on a rope, people could kiss and dance together, dogs could drink out of their bowls.

Characters could interact with each other and with their settings.”

Narrative capacities are naturally greater in second grade, but some of the first grader’s confidence and ebullience have been lost in the process. The second grader knows a piece of writing can be done right or wrong, can be liked or disliked by its audience. Therefore a good rehearsal for drafting in second grade is talking—a brief peer conference or group discussion to select a topic, then focusing on what might be covered in the draft. The goal is for the second grader’s writing to catch up with his or her talking. (And no doubt to siphon off a little of the writer’s anxiety in the process—what “real” writer doesn’t reach for the telephone instead of the typewriter when it’s deadline time?)

Third graders are even less convinced that they have a story that others want to hear, according to Calkins, and as a result their stories are likely to be cautious, predictable, familiar tales. To push them to extend their writing may mean a lot of rehearsal time—in the emotional arena, giving them the confidence to see the specifics of their story as interesting and compelling; in the skills arena, encouraging them to experiment with two, three, four lead sentences, all representing different approaches to the topic.

One of the factors that makes teaching fourth, fifth, and sixth graders so different from third graders, Calkins points out, is that “voice” comes more naturally to the older children—they feel relatively at ease pretending to be a particular person telling a particular story about a particular event. The chain of endless data that characterizes the paragraphs produced by second and third graders gives way to a new flair with the flow of time in a story, a capacity to emphasize some events more and others less, to organize a story from a point of view. (Imagine the power a fourth grader must feel when he or she discovers that a report on a first sailboat ride can be written as if the subject were Miss Piggy or Mr. T!)

In her chapter on adolescents, Calkins bemoans the fact that many teachers view the combination of this age group and the activity of writing as a volatile one and therefore avoid it. She points out that writing is more important than ever when one’s identity is in flux and the whole world needs to be re-evaluated. (Perhaps there are now too many “voices” available to the writer and too little meaning in any of them.) A supportive mood, she insists, is critical to the success of a writing workshop with adolescents; critiques might be better done in small groups instead of whole-class discussions.

Throughout these pages, one has a sense that if writing of power is to emerge from a student, whether the student is in kindergarten or eighth grade, the writing teacher must know and respect the areas of delicacy, the areas of fragility, the areas of strength.

An aid to this knowledge is the writing conference, which Calkins addresses next. Writing conferences concern different aspects of the piece of writing (content, design, process, evaluation, editing) and take different forms (child conferring with child, child with class, teacher with child). The purpose is always the same: to offer the writer a sense of authorship, of being heard, of response to what he or she has gotten onto paper so far, an idea of what’s missing to make the point, and how to go about it most effectively. The rule of thumb here, Calkins says, is that if a conference is going well, the child’s energy for writing increases.

The final two sections of the book, “Reading-Writing

Connections” and “Modes of Writing” are less comprehensive and less cohesive than the earlier sections—which may mean they are springboards for future books by Calkins. She gives an interesting example of a classroom that had a daily “reading workshop”—thirty minutes of silent reading of a book selected by one of the students for the class, after which the student reveals his or her “secret question” as a focus for group discussion. Examples of secret questions: “Why did the author start here?” “Is there a flashback?” “How does the author hook you?”

Throughout *The Art of Teaching Writing*, the number of anecdotes and samples of student writing greatly outweighs the number of concrete suggestions. This is both Calkins’ style—indeed you can’t transmit the art of anything with a concrete checklist—and the source of her authority—those hours of research. Don’t buy this book if you want to hear that a writing workshop should begin on a Monday with a rehearsal of two pages on the subject, “My Scariest Moment,” that Tuesday’s session will produce drafts which will be read and discussed on Wednesday in peer conferences, in preparation for Thursday’s 45-minute revision workshop. The author insists you go through the process on your own. She tries to set a good example by describing in detail her process; and yet the density of the anecdotes is ultimately frustrating, rather than helpful. I asked myself, “How much can I really learn about the art of teaching writing by reading these descriptions of other teachers teaching?” I felt trapped by the author’s intent to prove her points with research, with blow-by-blow descriptions of what the teacher said and what the student said in response. Since one of the major points of this book is that writing, to be “true,” to have the feel and pulse of reality, must not only be artfully toyed with, but must sometimes contain “untrue” facts that convey the true feeling, I would suggest that the writing of an anecdote should obey the same dictum. This much research really doesn’t work as a teaching tool. From an author of this intelligence and commitment, a reader wants and deserves more directives. If the author is protecting the reader who would simply extract and apply the directives without going through the careful watching and listening that is celebrated in the anecdotes, then she is letting down the reader who wouldn’t, who would read this book out of her or his own intelligence and commitment.

The anecdote technique is especially frustrating in the chapters on poetry and fiction, areas in which Calkins admits having the least confidence in her abilities. Her slight treatment of these modes provokes further thought—how are they different from personal writing and how are they similar?

They are similar in that drafts produced in both modes are handled by the teacher as part of a process of dialogue between the writer and the emerging text. They are different in that poems and short stories partake of the unconscious in a markedly different manner than do the products of non-fiction. Learning to trust the surprises of the imagination, the logic or illogic of the unconscious, is more important in poetry and fiction workshops than almost anything else—and that trust depends on a willingness of student and teacher alike to give up control. To extend Calkins’ metaphor of writing as a dialogue between the writer and the emerging text, poetry and fiction writing might be considered a dialogue between the unconscious and the emerging text. This is actually better news for kids, who have easier access to their unconscious lives, than for adults, who have to

recover theirs with industrial-strength equipment every day from the depths of the sea, like some sunken, lichen-covered World War II freighter.

Teachers and students of creative writing must accustom themselves to risk-taking both in thinking and in the use of language in order to navigate with expertise in the subliminal seas that produce the marvelous surprise associations, the unexpected harmonies, the lyrical paradoxes that are capable of changing our body temperatures—for this is part of the power of creative writing: it gets under our skin. Calkins quotes Emily Dickinson: “If I read a book and it makes my whole body so cold no fire can ever warm me, I know that is poetry.” Applied to personal writing, experimentation and risk-taking of this type result in pieces that are maddening, obscure, and inappropriate. To be successful, a piece of personal writing has to be cohesive and entertaining (in the sense that one wants to read on), and to convey the writer’s special point of view. It doesn’t have to be inspired.

Another area where the teaching of the two modes currently differs is in the use of models. Writing process devotees do not use models to teach, in reaction to the horrid medieval notions of the recent past, when students were ordered to write essays in the style of Francis Bacon, for example, in order to learn composition. Poetry and fiction writing can be taught very well by models. In *Moving Windows: Evaluating the Poetry Children Write*, Jack Collom, who has taught poetry in the schools for years, recommends poems by Denise Levertov, Philip Booth, William Blake, William Carlos Williams, Gary Snyder, and Langston Hughes as models for assignments. Other Teachers & Writers books contain assignments and directives of the type Calkins would probably find too specific and directional. Yet the spine does tingle when the poems these children write are read, the skin does creep, the body does turn cold. It is that now-ness of poetry, I believe, that fact of its *happening* to the reader, that justifies the use of models.

Sending a role model into the classroom helps too. Whether the visiting writer gives writing assignments based on classic forms or lets the forms originate in the self, we find that when children and teachers are exposed to the working mind of a working artist (whether poet, playwright, novelist, or film-maker), something of the art itself is rubbed off in the process. I tend to agree with Shirley Brice Heath, who Calkins thinks is going too far when she suggests that “the single most important condition for literacy learning is the presence of mentors who are joyfully literate people.” I also believe a mentor can be found outside of the classroom as well—an old fisherman, for example, who takes great joy in telling patently untrue tales spiced with an occasional malaprop might inspire a child to write.

In all, in spite of its excesses and slights, only a good book can have the effect *The Art of Teaching Writing* has: it provokes and energizes; it causes the reader to reexamine his or her prejudices, reformulate positions on pedagogy, review personal and professional strengths and weaknesses. The book is a major contribution. The author’s passion and vitality, her willingness to continue advancing the cause against all that is stale and deadening in education is music to my ears. Listen:

“Around the country, we are finding that the writing workshop can provide . . . new expectations for what it means to teach wisely and well, and a new sense of personal connectedness. In the writing workshop, moments of personal connection are the matrix out of

which everything else develops. Children write about what is alive and vital and real for them—and their writing becomes the curriculum. Their teachers listen, extend and guide; we also laugh, cry, and marvel. . . . The content of the writing workshop is the content of real life, for the workshop begins with what each student thinks, feels and experiences, and with the human urge to articulate and understand experience. The structure of the workshop is kept simple so that teachers and students are free from choreography and able to respond to the human surprises, to the small discoveries, to the moth as it pokes its antennae over the top of the desk.”

The Discontented Dromedary

by Jacques Prévert

ONE DAY THERE WAS A YOUNG DROMEDARY who was not at all happy.

The night before, he had told his friends, “Tomorrow I’m going out with my mother and father. We’re going to hear a lecture. That’s the way I am!”

And the others had said, “Oh, oh, he’s going to hear a lecture! Marvelous!” And he hadn’t slept all night, so impatient he was, and now he wasn’t happy because the lecture was nothing like he thought it would be: there was no music and he was disappointed, he was completely bored, he was on the verge of tears.

A portly gentleman spoke for an hour and forty-five minutes. In front of the portly gentleman there was a pitcher of water and a toothbrush glass and no brush in it, and from time to time the gentleman poured water into the glass and never brushed his teeth, and, visibly irritated, he talked about something else, namely, dromedaries and camels.

The young dromedary was suffocating and his hump bothered him. It rubbed against the seat-back. He was very uncomfortable. He squirmed.

Finally his mother said to him, “Sit still, let the man speak,” and she pinched his hump. The young dromedary felt more and more like crying, like getting out of there. . . .

Every five minutes the speaker repeated, “Above all we must not confuse the dromedary with the camel. I draw to your attention, ladies, gentlemen, and dear dromedaries, this fact: the camel has two humps, the dromedary but one!”

Everyone in the hall said, “Oh, oh, very interesting,” and the camels, the dromedaries, the men, women, and children took notes in their little notebooks.

And so the speaker picked up again, “What differentiates the two animals is that the dromedary has but one hump, while—a strange and useful thing to know—the camel has two of them. . . .”

Finally the young dromedary could take no more of this. He leaped up onto the platform and bit the speaker.

“Camel!” shouted the speaker.

And everyone in the auditorium cried out, “Camel, dirty camel, dirty camel!”

But he was a dromedary, and he was quite clean.

—Translated from the French by Ron Padgett

JACQUES PREVERT (1900-1977) was a French poet and screenwriter. “The Discontented Dromedary” is from his *Histoires*.

PLUGS



If you've looked at the few "creative writing" workbooks on the market, you know how pathetic they are. Hoping to turn things around, T&W has just published *The Writing Book*, its first writing workbook. In it students are led by Inky Penguin through 12 writing exercises—I Remember, Used to/But Now, Dreaming, Inventing, Freewriting, Describing, Acrostics, Haiku, Partners, Dialogue, Collage, and Revising—all fully explained and with examples, alongside a page for the student's own writing. *The Writing Book* also includes a nuts-and-bolts section on "How to Make Your Own Book" and five book-art exercises that directly parallel the writing exercises and can serve as illustrations in the books the students make. It's all rounded off with a glossary, a bibliography, and a "book review" form for the students to fill out. *The Writing Book* is completely self-explanatory and teacher-independent, but if teachers wish to build on it, a teacher's guide is also available. We tested this book in New York City classrooms, and the kids loved it. Single copies of *The Writing Book* are \$6.95 (teacher's manual \$3.95); 20 or

more copies are \$4.95 each (teacher's manual free with bulk orders) from Teachers & Writers Collaborative, 5 Union Square West, New York, NY 10003 (212/691-6590).

Teachers interested in qualitative research will want to know about *Teaching & Learning*, a new magazine edited by Bob King and scheduled to appear three times per year. According to its editorial statement, it will include articles, studies, pieces of journals, and other forms that come out of "thoughtful observation as an educational method, of description as a technique for understanding, and of lived experience as a source of knowledge." Coming out of the North Dakota Study Group, it should be very worthwhile. For more information, write to the Center for Teaching and Learning, Box 8158, University Station, Grand Forks, ND 58202.

Available from the same address is *Pathways: A Forum for Progressive Educators*, edited by Kathe Jervis. Currently in its second year, *Pathways* encourages "teachers and administrators to write from their own experience, to speculate about teaching, curriculum, children and learning, to describe their own classrooms, to reflect on their schools, and to explore the historical continuities which illuminate current practice." The issues we've seen have been very interesting. Subscriptions are \$5 per year.

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