FACING THE DILEMMA: TEACHING WRITING IN MIDDLE SCHOOL

HELEN HOLLINGSWORTH

Middle school English teachers everywhere face a dilemma: should the focus of the middle school English curriculum be on reading and grammar or on reading and writing? High school English teachers routinely expect students entering their classes to know grammar, and, most believe, there's no way middle school students are going to understand grammar when they enter high school unless teachers work with grammar daily in middle school. However, research tells us that students learn to write well when they write daily and when they work with writing as a process. Research also tells us that when we teach students grammar, we are not teaching them to write, and that grammar instruction does not lead to better compositions.[1] Grammar is what Constance Weaver calls a "metalanguage," a language for talking about language. Weaver says we teachers need to understand our grammar very well, but that students do not need to know grammar in the same way that we know it.[2]

So where does that leave us hapless middle school English teachers? We know we cannot teach reading, writing, and grammar equally well in the short time we see our students in English class every day. We're lucky if we can do a reasonable job on two out of three. We also know that grammar exercises are easier to grade than are compositions; often we have students exchange papers and correct the grammar exercises as we read the answers aloud in class. Then that's one less set of papers to pour over in those brief evening hours! But in the back of our minds we are uneasy;

Helen Hollingsworth teaches eighth grade writing skills at Batchelor Middle School, Bloomington.

we are uneasy because we want out students to write and to write often and to write well. We know in our heart of hearts that we are not teaching them to write when we ask them to copy sentences from their grammar book, underlining the subject once, the verb twice, the direct object three times, and circling the indirect object. We know that once our students finish school, they will never underline or circle the main parts of a sentence again. But we know they will need to write when they finish high school. We know that others will judge our students by their ability to write. And whether we like it or not, we know others judge public schools by whether students can read and write well when they graduate.

As with most dilemmas, there's a way out of this one, but the way isn't necessarily easy. The solution calls for some effort on our part as well as for some courage and something I call professional fortitude. We must be informed about current research in writing and about the process of writing. The solution calls for us as teachers to say to ourselves and to our colleagues that we base our curriculum decisions on the needs, interests, and abilities of our particular students and on current research in language. Consequently, we teach our students to write, and we teach them the elements of grammar only as it applies to their daily writing. Our students write every day; they do not copy exercises from grammar books. We no longer teach the grammar book from cover to cover.

Having taken a stand, we back up our decision with solid support. Exactly what does current research say about teaching writing?[3]

None of us is surprised when research says that our students are deficient in the conceptual aspects of writing, including organization, idea generation, and language, and in its practical aspects, such as mechanics, application of grammar, and spelling. How does research suggest we go about correcting these deficiencies? No surprises here, either. Research says to teach them to think concisely and to argue well as they keep in mind their audience and their purpose. Teach them techniques for generating ideas and organizing their ideas. Teach them strategies for evaluating, editing, and proofreading their written work. These are tall orders but ones that are possible and manageable in middle school.

Research says that we teachers can be successful in teaching our students to write if we ourselves also write.

Before we can establish writing programs for our students, we need to understand the process of writing ourselves; then we can teach the process to students in our classrooms. Since 1974 a number of writing programs for teachers have sprung up around the nation, many modeled on the Bay Area Writing Project (BAWP). The BAWP established the concept of teachers trained in the process of writing teaching other teachers in their school district, county, and state. Classroom teachers present inservice workshops based on teaching writing as a process, enabling other teachers to be trained.

Within the past four or five years, we've all read articles in *Newsweek, Time, Better Homes and Gardens,* and other popular magazines or newspapers complaining that students today do not and cannot write well. Often these articles say that English teachers are ill-prepared to teach writing, that methods used to teach composition are inadequate or inappropriate, and that too little emphasis is put on writing and on writing instruction. We've all read and heard that if English teachers would just get back to basics, we'd produce good writers in our schools. Not so, says researcher Robert Reising (1977). His research indicates that the use of outlines does not lead to better compositions, and that formal grammar instruction does not lead to better compositions. Research indicates that sentence-combining activities do more to improve student writing than do grammar exercises. Reising also found that intensive marking and evaluation are ineffective in teaching composition. In addition, holding students back from composing whole compositions until they can write "good sentences" is also inappropriate. We need to let them write and then work on revision and editing as part of the whole process of writing.

When we talk about teaching students the process of writing, we mean we teach students to generate ideas before they write, to form their writing as they write, to rewrite, restate, and reorganize their writing, and to revise and to edit. We teach them techniques for each part of the process, and we take them through the entire process so that the process, and not just the product, becomes the focus in the classroom. We know our students will not remember in years to come what they wrote while they were middle school students; but we want them to remember the process they went through as they wrote and to be so familiar with the process that they can carry it through without our direction. We want

them to be, in the words of Peter Elbow, "writers without teachers."

Heuristics is a word we see often in connection with teaching writing as a process. The word *heuristics* means *to find* or *to know* or *to invent.* In the workshop atmosphere of today's English classroom, we teach our students several techniques to help them to invent, discover, generate, and revise ideas about a topic they've chosen to write about. These techniques, called heuristics, are used to help students find out what they already know, what they need to find out, and what ordering principle or thesis they may want to generate in writing about their subject. Heuristics are generally used during the prewriting stage of the process, but they may be employed at any stage when the writer wishes to test ideas.

One heuristic that works well with middle school students, called timed writing, comes from Peter Elbow's work, *Writers Without Teachers.*[4] In a timed writing exercise, we ask our students to select a topic they want to write about, usually something they know well such as their family, their friends, school, video games, or sports. We ask them to write without stopping for ten minutes, getting down as much information as they can. We urge them not to worry about grammar, spelling, punctuation, paragraphing. Their purpose is to gain fluency, to write as much information as they can, and to write as quickly as they can on their chosen subject. If they get stuck for ideas during that time, they may repeat the last word, but they need to keep going, pushing themselves to amplify ideas. At the end of ten minutes, we ask them to finish writing the idea, the thought, or the sentence they are working on.

After the exercise, we discuss with our students how the writing went. We sympathize with them about the aching fingers, hand, elbow, shoulder, or neck (different students feel the initial pain of toughening up those muscles in different places), and explain how learning to write takes muscles we may not have been exercising much lately. We assure them that as they gain fluency and proficiency as writers, those muscles will strengthen and that they'll be able to write for periods of time without discomfort. Then we ask them how much they had written before they noticed that they were generating ideas and information faster than their hand could record the information on the page. In other words, we talk with them about their writing as one

writer to another. We let them know that the general process of writing is about the same for everyone, and as we gain experience with the process, we may refine and condense it, but the process remains the same for all of us. Since we write as our students write, we share with them how our writing went, letting them know that writers share common problems. We teach them vocabulary for talking about writing. Later, after students have practiced and mastered the technique of timed writing, we show them ways to use it in preparing writing assignments.

A second heuristic that middle school students use successfully builds on their experiences with timed writing exercises. This is called a looping exercise.[5] This exercise requires more time, but it often yields information with more detail and supplies students with surprising insights into their subject. As in the timed writing exercise, students select a familiar topic and write for five minutes. At the end of five minutes, they stop and read what they have written. Then they select a thought or an idea generated in the first writing that they want to explore in the next five minute period of writing. At the end of the second five minutes, they stop and read only the writing generated in the last five minutes and select from it the idea or thought they want to explore in the next five minutes of writing. Students continue in this fashion until they have written four or more separate loops, thus the name for the exercise. The advantage of looping is that students duplicate what adults do when they write. Adult writers write, read, and continue to write, research shows. Young writers, however, tend to write without reading the text for conformation, and by teaching them to read as they write, we're teaching them to use a technique practiced by adult writers. We help students practice looping until they are familiar with the possibilities it offers in helping them generate information for writing.

Another heuristic middle schoolers use successfully is called cubing, so called because we look at our subject in six different ways, writing about each way or side of our cube for about two or three minutes each.[6] First we describe our subject, writing down every detail we can think of to make the subject seem real to someone who has no knowledge of what this thing is. Next we compare our subject to something others may know about. For example, students may select school for the subject of their cubing, and when they compare school to something, prison or jail is a favorite comparison. Then they explain ways the two compare.

The third way we look at our subject is to associate it with something. School, for example, may be associated with friends, work, schedules, and books. The fourth way to look at the subject is to analyze it. What are its parts? How is it put together? Next we apply it. What good is this thing we're writing about? Finally, in the sixth way of looking at our subject, we argue for it or against it. This final way of looking at our subject may take more than two or three minutes. By this time in their writing, students are generating more and more ideas, which is, of course, exactly what the exercise is meant to do.

For years we've used other heuristics in our classes, though we may not have known the formal name for the techniques is heuristics. We've brainstormed with our students on subjects before we've asked them to write. We've written a topic on the board and gathered from our students all the ideas they could think of connected with the topic. We accepted all ideas and suggestions, no matter how remote from the topic, until barely any clear writing space remained. Another heuristic we've used is the familiar who, what, where, when, why, and how. We've taught our students to ask questions beginning with the *W*s or *H* and we've taught them to seek answers prior to writing. And, of course, we've known for years about the possibilities for generating ideas for writing in keeping a journal.

Research indicates that students lack the ability to generate ideas for writing. To overcome this deficiency, we teach them several heuristics to use as prewriting exercises to get the creative juices flowing before they begin the first draft of their writing. Not only do we teach them how to generate ideas with heuristics, but also we show them how to organize the ideas they've put down on paper. The prewriting stage in the process of writing was the most neglected, but with an understanding of the use of heuristics, we teach our students to invent, to generate, and to discover ideas for compositions that delight them as writers and us as readers and teachers.

As we guide our students through the process of writing, we teach them to shape their writing into book reports, letters, editorials, essays, stories, and reports. We teach them to respond to each other as writers, and to use written and oral response from others as aids in revising their compositions. When our students revise their writing, we teach them to outline their own work in order to discover relation-

ships and alternate means of organizing the ideas. When they edit their work in preparation for the final draft, we help them discover what they need to know about grammar and punctuation to overcome errors in their own written work. The chart in the appendix takes assignments through the process, illustrating how we can integrate writing and grammar in the classroom.

Students who write daily generate mountains of papers. We know how to cope with papers with grammar exercises on them, but we are more hesitant about how to assess those written compositions. If we mark every error on every paper, research says we're not really doing anything meaningful for our students, and we're tying ourselves to hours of drudgery. One method that works is to give students credit for what they do daily and to grade one assignment each week. The grading may be done in a conference with the student during class, or it may be done by assessing the composition for only one or two things which students have been working on in class. For example, a composition may be graded only for vivid verbs and complete sentences. Students will write, even though they may not receive a grade, if they know they receive credit for having done the work. This solution frees the teacher to teach and students to write.

Middle school teachers who confront the grammar-or-writing dilemma and seek to teach the process of writing as the core of their English classes find their students acquire a tremendous sense of confidence in themselves as writers. Teaching students to compose and produce a final draft of compositions requires an enormous amount of teacher energy, yet the growth and progress our students make more than justify the effort.

APPENDIX

Assignment	Prewriting Activity	Writing Activity	Revision Activity	Editing Activity	Publishing
A. Pick someone you know and tell a story about this person and you. Tell us something that happened or something you enjoy doing with this person. Help your readers to know what happened and how you and this person felt about it. Your reader is someone your own age. Add a title.	1. Discuss the process of writing. Explain why we do pre-writing activities. 2. Students do a 10 minute timed writing about a friend and themselves.	1. Teach (or review) the form of a paragraph and ways to develop a paragraph. 2. Teach rules for writing titles. 3. Students write story for assignment.	1. Teach ways to get concrete details in writing. 2. Students revise story, adding concrete details to story.	1. Review punctuation rules. 2. Do exercises requiring application of rules of punctuation. 3. Edit story for correct punctuation.	1. Share writing in small groups. 2. Post writing on bulletin board.
B. Tell a story about you and something that happened at school. It can be something that happened this year or something that happened a long time ago. Help us to know what happened and how you felt. Your reader is someone your own age. Add a title.	1. Discuss again the parts of the process of writing. 2. Students do a 10 minute timed writing about something that happened to them at school.	1. Teach sentence combining techniques. 2. Teach ways to begin a story to grab reader interest, such as conversation, a question, a startling fact, a quote, or a recent event. 3. Write story for assignment.	1. Teach ways to get several specific details in sentences. 2. Students revise story, checking sentences for specific details.	1. Continue review of punctuation rules. 2. Edit story for correct punctuation.	1. Share writing in small groups. 2. Post writing on bulletin board. 3. Compile a booklet on school experiences.

Assignment	Prewriting Activity	Writing Activity	Revision Activity	Editing Activity	Publishing
C. Describe a place you know that is special to you. It could be a room, an outdoors setting, a building, or a place that only you know. Help your readers see what this place looks like and why it is special to you. Add a title.	1. Discuss with students what a looping exercise is and why we do it as writers. 2. Students do a looping exercise centering on a place. 3. Teach critical thinking skills, similarities and differences.	1. Discuss needs of audience in picturing a place and ways writers help readers visualize. 2. Discuss and teach analogies. Teach similes and metaphors. 3. Students write assignment about a special place, including sentences with similes and metaphors.	1. Review verb tenses. 2. Revise writing for consistent verb tenses as well as similes and metaphors.	1. Review run-on sentences. 2. Do exercises correcting run-on sentences. 3. Edit story for correct spelling, punctuation, and sentence structure.	1. Share writing in small groups. 2. Post writing on bulletin board.
D. Write one or more paragraphs expressing your opinion about something. Give at least three or more reasons for your opinion. Your purpose is to convince a reader who is your own age to share your opinion. Add a title.	1. Teach definitions for fact and opinion. 2. Students write 10 facts and 10 opinions. 3. Students select an opinion and list three or more reasons for the opinion. 4. Students cube on subject on which they wrote their opinion.	1. Teach students to evaluate quality of support. 2. Students write paragraphs for assignment, remembering to introduce subject to reader, give opinion on the subject, state reasons for opinion, and end by restating opinion.	1. Revise assignment by improving quality of support for opinion. 2. Put support in order of importance to convince reader.	1. Review rules for plurals and possessives. 2. Edit assignment for punctuation, capitalization, and spelling.	1. Share writing with entire class by reading aloud. 2. Post writing on bulletin board.

NOTES

[1]Robert Reising, "Battling the Basics,or Coping with the Clamor over Composition," in *Confronting Writing Obstacles,* Connecticut Council of Teachers of English, 1977. For further research on the relationship of grammar instruction to writing see the following: Eyal Amiran and Judy Mann, *Written Composition, Grades K-12: Literature Synthesis and Report* (Portland, Oregon: Northwest Regional Educational Laboratory, 1982). F. S. Hoyt, "The Place of Grammar in the Elementary Curriculum," *Teachers College Record,* 7 (1906), 1-34. Henry C. Meckel, "Research on the Teaching of English," in *Handbook of Research on Teaching,* ed. N. L. Gage (Chicago: Rand McNally, 1963). Stephen J. Sherwin, *Four Problems in Teaching English: A Critique of Research* (Scranton: International Textbook Company, 1969). Ingrid M. Strom, *Research in Grammar and Usage and Its Implications for Teaching Writing,* Bulletin of the School of Education, Indiana University, 36, No. 5 (Bloomington: 1960). Richard Braddock, et. al., *Research in Written Composition* (Champaign, Ill.: National Council of Teachers of English, 1963). W. B. Elley, et. al., *The Role of Grammar in a Secondary School Curriculum.* (Auckland: New Zealand Council of Teachers of English, 1979). Available from the NCTE. Mark Lester, "The Value of Transformational Grammar in Teaching Composition," *College Composition and Communication,* 18 (1967), 227-231. Mike Rose, "Rigid Rules, Inflexible Plans, and the Stifling of Language: A Cognitivist Analysis of Writer's Block," *College Composition and Communication,* 31 (1980), 389-401.

[2]Constance Weaver, *Grammar For Teachers: Perspectives and Definitions* (Champaign, Ill.: NCTE, 1979).

[3]See citations above.

[4]Peter Elbow, *Writing Without Teachers* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1973).

[5]Peter Elbow, *Writing With Power* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1982).

[6]Gregory and Elizabeth Cowan, *Writing* (Gleview, Ill.: Scott, Foresman, 1982).