

2005

Toward successful student writers: Change and growth in writing workshop

Kirstey Ewald
University of Northern Iowa

Let us know how access to this document benefits you

Copyright ©2005 Kirstey Ewald

Follow this and additional works at: <https://scholarworks.uni.edu/grp>



Part of the [Education Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Ewald, Kirstey, "Toward successful student writers: Change and growth in writing workshop" (2005).
Graduate Research Papers. 39.

<https://scholarworks.uni.edu/grp/39>

This Open Access Graduate Research Paper is brought to you for free and open access by the Student Work at UNI ScholarWorks. It has been accepted for inclusion in Graduate Research Papers by an authorized administrator of UNI ScholarWorks. For more information, please contact scholarworks@uni.edu.

Offensive Materials Statement: Materials located in UNI ScholarWorks come from a broad range of sources and time periods. Some of these materials may contain offensive stereotypes, ideas, visuals, or language.

Toward successful student writers: Change and growth in writing workshop

Find Additional Related Research in UNI ScholarWorks

To find related research in UNI ScholarWorks, go to the collection of [Languages and Literatures Graduate Research Papers](#) written by students in the [Department of Languages and Literatures](#), College of Humanities, Arts and Sciences, at the University of Northern Iowa.

Abstract

A writing workshop has always been a part of my classroom. Since the beginnings of my career as an English teacher, I have believed that it allows my students the freedom required for them to think for themselves and to express their thoughts clearly. Yet while students have clamored for such trust and autonomy in their classes, they often have a hard time adapting to this change, to setting their own goals and making individual strides to meet those goals. They are very used to having their teachers tell them what to think and what to write about. They have gotten good at the game of writing down an instructor's ideas in their notes and regurgitating those ideas to the instructor in a test, literary analysis paper, or "creative" project. However, in a learning-centered environment like writing workshop, the teacher is not at the forefront, the kids are.

Towards Successful Student Writers: Change and Growth in Writing Workshop

by Kirstey Ewald

Introduction

A writing workshop has always been a part of my classroom. Since the beginnings of my career as an English teacher, I have believed that it allows my students the freedom required for them to think for themselves and to express their thoughts clearly. Yet while students have clamored for such trust and autonomy in their classes, they often have a hard time adapting to this change, to setting their own goals and making individual strides to meet those goals. They are very used to having their teachers tell them what to think and what to write about. They have gotten good at the game of writing down an instructor's ideas in their notes and regurgitating those ideas to the instructor in a test, literary analysis paper, or "creative" project. However, in a learning-centered environment like writing workshop, the teacher is not at the forefront, the kids are. They are no longer passive participants in their education; they are the active ingredient in the classroom. In fact, Douglas Kaufman, the author of *Conferences & Conversations: Listening to the Literate Classroom*, states that a workshop approach to a classroom means that students "have to work harder, communicate better, and think more deeply" (6). Clearly, this design allows students to have the ownership they desire for their learning.

Thus, when I arrived at my current teaching assignment, I employed writing workshop in my junior-senior writing elective class Composition and Rhetoric. I continue to do so to this day, but after six years of reflecting upon my students' and my performance in class, Comp. and Rhet. seems stilted. My students do not seem to have a sense of pride or success in their writing ability. Rather, they tend to emit a sense of apprehension, frustration, and aversion to writing. Quite honestly, they are simply happy to have survived the course. And I'm glad to have survived their stress-filled experience in my classroom, one that the structure of my writing workshop, in part, has created. Thus, I need to build on the knowledge and experience I already

have about writing workshop. I need to go back to its roots and revamp Comp. and Rhet. I have to serve my students better. In reality, I believe that together my students and I can create a writing workshop that helps them become successful writers.

Composition and Rhetoric: A Vignette

It's Monday morning in room 204. Alex walks into the classroom about ten minutes before the bell rings and drops his book-laden backpack on the floor beside his designated desk at the front of the room. He's tired; he had a football game on Friday and had to work an eight-hour shift at McDonald's on Saturday and Sunday night.

He opens up his bag and grabs his Comp. and Rhet. binder. He fishes out the rough draft of his school controversy paper, three copies of which are due today at the beginning of class. He chose to write this first essay about prayer in public schools. He really wanted to write about the BCS, the Bowl Championship Series. As a big football fan and player, he doesn't think it's fair that college teams who do well during their season are not given a chance to play in the championship games when they rightly deserve to. However, Ms. Ewald suggested that he save that topic for his third paper. She felt that the topic he chose for this essay needed to be about issues related to high schools, and the BCS issue deals with post-secondary institutions. Oh well, he thinks, at least he'll get to write about it sometime. But it would have been great to write about the BCS during the football season when it was actually an immediate controversy.

Alex scans his essay to see if he has the proper format. He remembers Ms. E. saying that everyone in the class should follow the five-paragraph essay format as close as possible. Essentially, all eighteen students should compose a paper that looks pretty much the same. Each piece should have an introduction that includes attention getter and thesis, with the thesis at the

end of the paragraph; three body paragraphs, each with a topic sentence at the beginning, at least two examples of the supporting point, in-depth explanations of the examples, and a summary sentence at the end; and a conclusion with a restated thesis in the first sentence, a tie back to the attention getter, final thoughts, and a closing statement that provides closure and impact at the end. Does he have all of that? He was very careful to follow the handout with the essay structure on it. But he's not very confident that they're "right." What makes an example different from an explanation? Does the example have to come before the explanation? Can he just have one explanation for both examples (like he's done), or does he have to write an explanation for each example like in the sample paper they painstakingly went through in class? Plus, does what he's saying make any sense? He was confused by the ideas he wrote regarding the separation of church and state, but he didn't really have time to go back and fix them. This is a concern, though; he knows that Ms. Ewald has a reputation for having high expectations.

Alex gets up from his desk and three-hole punches each of the copies of his essay. Other students start to wander into the classroom now. There's a bit of light chatter here and there between some really good friends who happen to be in the same section, but mostly everyone comes in and immediately prepares for class. Some go to their assigned computer at the back of the lab and print off their copies; some sit down quietly in their desks. They're not sure what they're going to be doing today with all of the drafts, but they're sure there's some sort of purpose. Ms. E. always has the class well organized, and they generally always have a task that will take up the entire forty-eight-minute period.

Alex sits back down at his desk and waits for the bell to ring. Today is the first day he's going to share an essay he wrote for Comp. and Rhet. He's always been a decent writer and

hopes this class will help showcase that. Still, he's pretty anxious right now. He wants this to be a good experience and to do well, but he's not sure that he's followed all the directives to do that.

Alex's scenario typifies a lot of the students with whom I come into contact in Comp. and Rhet., a class that focuses on formal, academic, persuasive writing. The course is comprised of four main papers: school controversy, research and analysis, refutation, and style. Out of the three writing electives that are not AP classes, Comp. and Rhet. is considered the toughest. It has prerequisites of grade and ITED score: a letter grade of B or higher in the students' sophomore English class and an ITED score in the 80th percentile. In addition, they are expected to write at a level required of a college freshman.

Most of the students who take this course are considered "smart" kids. They tend to be very grade conscious and are used to getting good grades fairly easily. They put a lot of effort into their classes and are conscientious about their work, which are extremely admirable qualities that I want to further in these students. However, I'd like to focus their energy on their learning rather than on their current emphasis on meeting the requirements of the course.

A Writing Workshop: Evolution of a Concept

After researching the topic of writing workshop, I've found that I'm doing a lot of things that are on target: providing time in class to write, having an organized set of procedures, having an organized classroom, expressing my expectations clearly. But there are also some ideas from the authors that make me consider implementing specific modifications to allow the writing workshop in Comp. and Rhet. to better create successful student writers.

1. A writing workshop does not have to include a set of regimented writing process steps.

Currently, all of my students complete the writing process steps (prewriting, drafting, response, revision, editing, conferencing, and finalizing) the same way and at the same time, with the exception of teacher-student conferences. I set up a conference with each student over his/her revised draft where I do “cold” conferencing (a conference in which I have not read the student’s draft prior to our conference). Before the conference, the student completes a reflection sheet. This form has three different sections: one where the writer reflects on two parts of the essay s/he feels are well done, a second where s/he talks about three parts of the essay that need revision, and a third where s/he discusses three different editing problems. After filling out that reflection form, the student creates her revised draft by making the changes to the areas she’s addressed on the reflection form. At the conference the student and I only go over the parts of her paper designated on that sheet. Further, the students are all working on the same essay at the same time, and all of the essays are due the same day.

There are two problems with this design, one with the writing process structure and one with the teacher-student conferences.

First, my students aren’t all ready at the same time with their pieces, which is why some of the students resist going through all of the steps I require. In the second edition of her book *In the Middle: New Understandings about Writing, Reading, and Learning*, Nancie Atwell states that she is “careful never to talk about **the writing process**, because the phrase implies one series of steps through which everyone proceeds in creating a piece of writing” (emphasis original, bolded added, 157). Instead, Atwell discusses and models different phases that writers *could* go through while creating a piece. Her list (Figure 1) includes many of the steps of “my” writing process, but her steps are guidelines, not requirements (Atwell 157).

 FIGURE 1

WHAT AUTHORS DO

Writers:

- rehearse: develop an idea, perhaps make notes or lists or try different leads
- draft one and read, revise, confer
- (maybe) draft two and read, revise, confer
- decide the content is set
- polish: final word choices, clarification, tightening
- final, formal editing for conventions
- peer editing, if you wish
- submit to an outside editor (e.g., the teacher)
- create a final copy
- proofread
- publish

Her goal is to create an atmosphere of “real” writers, and “real” writers don’t follow such a strict structure of writing process each time they write or for each piece they compose. For instance, sometimes students don’t need to do a prewriting activity; they’ve been thinking about their piece over and over again in their head, mulling over the words, the images, the organization; they’re ready to draft when they decide on that particular topic. Doing a required prewriting activity would simply be unnecessary busy work for that student. Clearly, Atwell wants to provide different methods for students that might help them create a piece in which they have pride and success, but she doesn’t want the process to get in the way of their ideas and enthusiasm for writing.

Secondly, I don’t see the students’ writing until they have created a second draft. True, I *am* meeting with my students during the process, before they turn their piece in for a grade. And many students have commented that they receive a lot of benefit from these formal teacher-

student conferences. Sarah Warshauer Freedman, who authored “Recent Developments in Writing: How Teachers Manage Response,” has some insight into why students value a teacher conference so much: “[I]ndividual conferences during the process are most helpful to [students], followed by grades on their finished pieces” (37). However, I feel that this formal conference is a little late in the process. During these teacher-student conferences, I see the draft when the students are very near to finalizing it. The students don’t want to strengthen their pieces by incorporating my suggestions because they are too mentally exhausted by the unit’s many requirements. Also, sometimes they feel that the suggestions have little impact on their piece since it is so close to being completed. They feel they’ve worked and reworked their essay enough already; they like it as it is.

The problem here is with the students’ focus. They aren’t thinking about creating better writing; they’re thinking about finishing the piece. I need to shift their concentration to learning, not the product. In her book *Seeking Diversity: Language Arts with Adolescents*, Linda Rief knows “that evaluation of writing *in progress* is as important, if not *more* important, than the final product” (emphasis original, qtd. in Kaufman 15). I must gain more access to student writing while they are creating it. I must walk around the room consistently everyday to see if the students have questions and take the time to talk to them about those concerns. I must create an ease of talking with my students informally about their work. Students must know that they can discuss any and all concerns, little to big, at any time. That way I’m interacting with them while they are pushing themselves, *while they are in the moment of their learning*. Recognizing and valuing that learning will, I think, help to further their progress and success with writing.

2. My responses to student work need to be less evaluative.

When the time comes for me to respond to the students's papers, my response comes in the form of assessment, of a grade. In essence, I've put myself in the role of an error hunter. While Freedman's feedback from students says this assessment is most helpful to them, I want them to look beyond correctness in form and content. I don't want them to judge their overall success by how well they have met each of the requirements dictated by the rubric. While I do need to look at areas on the rubric in which my students could improve, I think they'd get a lot more out of my "e-value-ation" if they actually got to see what I *valued* about their work. R.W. Burniske, who wrote the article "Creating Dialogue: Teacher Response to Journal Writing," supports teachers providing responses to content: "What the student deserves, and what [teachers] struggle against time to provide, is an intellectual response which shows not only that we are impressed by the performance and pleased with the effort, but also that we are seriously engaged with their ideas, their minds" (87). I need to make the focus of my assessment more about the ideas they've presented. It, quite simply, needs to be more personal. Those personal responses will allow them to really know that I respect and listen to their voices. Those responses are what will allow students to know that they are doing well, that their success as a writer means more than just a grade.

3. A writing workshop should allow more student choice.

In Comp. and Rhet., students do have the freedom to choose their own topics. However, the class curriculum intends for the students to focus on the "big" controversies in the world, social issues like abortion, gun control, euthanasia, capital punishment. And at their stage in life, they are beginning to form opinions about such topics, influenced by a wide array of factors: family, religion, peers, school, media, etc. Yet the students don't really get to investigate these

matters and express their opinions about these topics on a highly personal level. Certain kinds of topics are required for certain essays within the course, which limits these students from truly becoming involved in their writing. Plus, they are expected to express their viewpoint in a very strict structure, the five-paragraph essay. They are controlled in their content and the form they express it in.

One way to eradicate these barriers is for teachers to have a solid, personal rapport with their students. Linda Rief, interviewed by Douglas Kaufman for his book *Conferences & Conversations*, has a definite perspective about the importance of relationship-building:

If we don't know how [students] think about themselves as adolescents, as young women or young men—the things they're concerned with—then the big things we want to talk to them about—the way we deal with each other as human beings, the ways we treat each other—they're not going to listen to [those things either].”

(qtd. in Kaufman 85)

The teacher has to know what matters to the students in her class. For instance, if one of her students is struggling with a romantic situation, then that should be something about which the teacher first deals with the student. Out of that connection, the teacher can go on to discuss the importance of trust, choices, identity and encourage this student to write about his/her perspective about one of those big ideas. An opinion essay about choices could cover whether or not teenagers should have sexual relations with their partners, whether teenagers are mature enough to handle romantic relationships, how teenagers can create a successful love relationship, or how teenagers can find their “perfect” mate. These topics are no less important or socially conscious than ones like abortion. The only thing that makes them less acceptable or relevant is

a dictum created under a course description. Thus, these topics would be perfectly viable for a research paper or for a refutation paper.

Another way to create personal involvement with students writing over controversial topics is to move away from the five-paragraph theme. Comp. and Rhet. has traditionally instructed students to set up their essays in this organizational pattern. However, it hinders student expression as Kimberly Wesley, who wrote an article for *English Journal* entitled “The Ill Effects of the Five-Paragraph Theme,” points out. She sees that such a strict structure “actually dissuades students from practicing the rhetorical analysis necessary for them to become critical thinkers” (58). Students don’t really process the information and analyze it completely in order to find out how it affects them, their community, and their world. They find little motivation to delve into a topic because they can only write so much about it anyway. Thus, their essays tend to give a sort of antiseptic, distant tone due to their limited amount of space. They only scratch the surface of the issue so that they can cram the information in to the five paragraphs.

In truth, the structure of the essay should enable students to share *their* ideas. In her article “Recent Developments in Writing: How Teachers Manage Response,” Sarah Warshauer Freedman agrees: “Students will feel ownership of their writing only if they have a reason for writing beyond being tested by the teacher and following the teacher’s orders” (36). It’s hard to care about a topic, let alone writing, when a student feels that the teacher is looking to see if he has the correct number of paragraphs, examples, and sentences of explanation. The students begin to feel that what they say has little importance to the instructor. They’re not being assessed on the expression of their opinions and effort to become knowledgeable about a topic; their grade depends on the essay requirements.

Finally, the switch in focus to ideas rather than structure would allow students to work as real writers. How many five-paragraph essays do people see published in magazines, newspapers, online? I don't see any, and I'd wager that most other readers don't either. Nancie Atwell believes that her student writers need the opportunity to choose the form for their writing. In her book *In the Middle*, she states that “[f]reedom of choice does not undercut structure. Instead, students become accountable for learning about and using the structures available to writers to serve their purpose” (Atwell 15). When students decide how to organize their pieces, they are thinking about all of the things we writing teachers want, and they're doing that thinking on their own, for their own reasons. For example, they will have to consider their purpose: is their thesis clear? do they have enough detail of ideas to influence readers to agree with their thesis? They will consider their writing situation: have they expressed why this topic is so important, important enough to write about, important enough to read about? And they have to think about their audience: does the arrangement of their ideas effectively influence those readers? They are looking to see if their writing will have a far-reaching impact, one beyond getting the five-paragraph essay structure correct.

4. A writing workshop should not be completely silent.

Generally, in my Comp. and Rhet. class, I insist on quiet. The quiet shows that the students are not distracting each other or themselves, that my students are diligently working. In fact, I often see other students whisper to each other when they need to ask questions. But what's sad is that they don't whisper out of common courtesy; they whisper because they're scared to make too much noise. And knowing that there's that sort of fear, over something so small, makes me realize I must change the classroom atmosphere if I want my kids to be

successful writers. I want to create a place where the students feel free to discuss their work with each other: to ask questions about their pieces, to show each other their drafts, to conference with each other. The students shouldn't have to wait to discuss their work with me at a certain time for an allotted twenty minutes. The entire workshop should be time for them to connect and confer as writers.

Still, I don't want this classroom change to become chaotic. The students should be able to write in a more social and unstructured setting. Linda Rief, who uses this sort of set up with her own seventh- and eighth-grade students, has few problems with its design: "When [students] attend to their work, they heed the rule of relative quiet, in need of it themselves" (qtd. in Kaufman 49). Generally, students are respectful of each other and keep the volume low. They know that when they want to create, when they want to compose, they need some solace too. They don't want to get in the way of other students' needs. Plus, the conferencing that goes on between students can be at a whisper and away from other students. Nancie Atwell, a well-respected teacher-researcher of writing workshop, sets up conferencing stations in her writing workshop away from the quiet areas designated for writing (75). This creates a clear separation of purpose, a place for discussing writing and a place for doing writing. With such an organization established by the physical locales of the room and by the procedures, the students have a place to work socially and independently. All of their needs are met.

5. A writing workshop has to have some tie to reading.

Currently, the only reading students do in Comp. and Rhet. deals with the sources they find for research. They don't do any other kind of reading except for finding information. To me, this seems problematic. True, this is a kind of reading they need to have experience in; they

will use that skill a lot. However, only focusing on this kind of reading limits my students' breadth of reading ability and reading pleasure. Again, they are doing something in Comp. and Rhet. because it's required for the course, not for their own edification. I'd like them to take part in inquiry first, where they explore an issue through reading, reading of any kind and of their choosing. From that investigation, they seek advocacy for themselves, to advocate their stance on the subject through their writing. There is a clear shift here that emphasizes learning first. They aren't just expected to argue their opinion; they are expected gain knowledge of the issue and grow from that knowledge. Making this switch will give them a taste of what real writers do—investigate, learn, express—instead of giving them the idea that the reading related to writing has to be factual and a chore.

First, I want students to become engaged in the reading of their peers' pieces. I want them to embody Louise Rosenblatt's philosophy in her text *The Reader, the Text, the Poem* where she encourages people to respond to texts in a transactional way, where the meaning is made between the reader and the piece of writing (29). The students should conjure up their own reactions and opinions based on their peers' pieces, just as though they were reading a novel. When they become involved in the text, they can provide their best responses/ suggestions to the writer. In fact, Douglas Kaufman commented on how Linda Rief's reactions to student writing were very much like this when she conferred with her students:

The thoughts and emotions that John's story arouse come from Linda's stance as a captivated appreciator of a text, not just as an academic evaluator looking for flaws. She allows the story to affect her aesthetically. In the same way that each individual brings his or her own life to a book, constructing a unique

interpretation to the text influenced by personal experiences, Linda constructs her own personal vision from John's text. (80)

Only when students go beyond the conventions and to the content can they really get to the heart of a piece. Thus, I need to provide more opportunities for them to do this, more guidance and modeling of this myself. That way their reading of each other's work is a valuable act, not just something they do as a requirement of the class.

In addition, I want students to read professional pieces. I'd like there to be a mix of pieces that model the kinds of writing they are supposed to create (persuasive essays) and works that allow them to grow in their knowledge and opinions about the issues that matter to them. The works in the latter category would not necessarily have to be non-fiction either. Many novels provide people with a look at topics in today's society that help them to ponder their own positions about the subject. For instance, Jodi Picoult wrote the novel *My Sister's Keeper*. In it, a set of parents choose to genetically engineer a third child, Anna, in order to use her bone marrow to stave off the leukemia of their second child, Kate. Kate's parents and older brother, Jesse, are not a match. After Anna is born, her body is continually used to help Kate live through other bone marrow transplants and blood transfusions. However, a big controversy arises when Anna is asked to save Kate's life by donating one of her organs. After I read this book, I wondered what I would do in the parents' situation, especially when the technology is available for such a live-saving, albeit drastic, procedure. They were compelled to take part in it by love of their daughter Kate, but did that love blind them to the needs of Anna? Was it right of them to expect that Anna would just give up her body in order to keep Kate's well? Picoult's fiction got me thinking about the issue of genetic engineering and the ethics that surround it in a way I hadn't considered before; I was interested in finding out more about the topic. I'm sure other

titles would do the same for my students. Clearly, by providing this sort of reading, the students' writing will grow. As a matter of fact, John Hershey, author of the article "Partnership in Pleasure," says, "The urge to write is the child of the love of reading. There is absolutely no use in trying to push young people to communicate, to express themselves, to write clear straight sentences. . . unless, long before, you have helped them discover the pleasure in reading" (qtd. in Walshe). With reading added to the curriculum of Comp. and Rhet., my students will have more experiences with writing and will have played an active role with it as a reader.

A Writing Workshop: Modifications and Aspirations

Now that I have identified the changes I need to make to the writing workshop in Comp. and Rhet. and what research supports/ prompts such changes, I will outline the way I intend to address each one of the concerns in my course.

1. A writing workshop does not have to include a set of regimented steps in the writing process.

Since I am not going to require students to go through a rigid writing process or a writing process that will be done simultaneously, one of the things I'm going to start doing is a Status of the Class (Appendix A). Nancie Atwell describes using this in her book *In the Middle*. She has the students tell her the topic of the piece they are currently working on and what they intend to do with that piece. She believes that it will serve as a way to help students stay on task, assess success at grading periods, and help students with reading/ writing concerns (Atwell 107). To make the recording of the Status of the Class run more smoothly, I will provide the students with a list of options they might be doing with their piece (Figure 1.1).

FIGURE 1.1

Composition and Rhetoric
WRITING PROCESS STATUS: OPTIONS

You might be . . .

- | | |
|---|---|
| 1. Prewriting: sketching out your ideas through lists, journals, graphic organizers, etc. | 8. Conferencing with a peer |
| 2. Researching a topic | 9. Revising: focusing on organization, development, structure (of paragraphs/sentences) |
| 3. Notetaking: annotating sources, notecards, outline, graphic organizer, etc. | 10. Editing: focusing on writing conventions of usage, mechanics, grammar, capitalization, spelling |
| 4. Skill Lesson: Works Cited, Incorporating Quotes, Logical Fallacies, etc. | 11. Finalizing an essay: using the rubric & teacher conference suggestions |
| 5. Completing your Essay Plan | 12. Completing your Self-Evaluation |
| 6. Drafting (and tell me which draft you're on) | 13. Reading (and tell me the title of the piece) |
| 7. Responding to a piece | 14. Writing your Reader Response Letter |

In order to be sure that I am circulating through my class of writers so that I can meet them during the crucial parts of their learning, I will record on the Status of the Class each day the students with whom I've talked during the period. Atwell does this by placing a checkmark by the name of the students she's talked to (I will probably do something similar). Like her, this method will allow me to know which students I need to talk to the next day in class, and I will be able to touch base with all of my students throughout the week (107). I am hoping that this more impromptu talk will allow me to have more in-depth knowledge about the pieces; I will have seen them in various stages and worked with the students at the various stages of their thinking on the pieces. In addition to helping the students' pieces, this will also allow me to have a better

rapport with the students. Linda Rief, whose class David Kaufman observed in order to write *Conferences & Conversations*, always begins her conferences with “How can I help you?” She believes that the question “starts the conference in the writer’s hands: the writer controls the topic and Linda addresses the stated needs before she can impose her own agenda” (qtd. in Kaufman 62). The students will know that I care about what *they* care about in their pieces. They can move forward as writers when they have a voice in the conference; it won’t be I solving their problems-- *we’ll* be solving their problems together.

2. My responses to student work need to be less evaluative.

I am still going to require that students have a scheduled conference with me. I do want to see their essay in its pre-turn in stage. However, there will be some changes to this conference.

First of all, the conference will no longer be a cold conference. Before the conference, I will expect my students to turn in their essay with evidence that the piece has gone through response, revision, and editing (Figure 2.1). I will then read the teacher-conference draft. I don’t want to read the whole thing during the more impromptu conferences I will have with students as I circulate around the room; those are for the more pointed and immediate concerns of their writing and learning at that moment. Plus, I’m afraid that if I do that the students will become too dependent on my opinion and guidance rather than seeking out the other seventeen writers in the class. Virginia Broz is a veteran middle school language arts teacher whose training in writing, reading, and learning led her to her current position as the secondary learning/reading specialist for the Cedar Falls School District. When I discussed the different options for reading student drafts, she offered me her own experience. She told her students that she didn’t want to

see their drafts until they had struggled with them (Broz). She believes that the struggle to compose, to create, to change their pieces is what leads students' learning about writing. They have to do the act of writing on their own, and then she can offer them some suggestions to further their craft.

FIGURE 2.1

Composition and Rhetoric
WRITING PROCESS CHECKLIST

Name _____ Period _____

Directions: Check off each step in the writing process as you complete it.

Teacher Conference Procedure: For your teacher conference, turn in every part listed on this checklist ABOVE the bolded line. Place each part in the order of the writing process checklist, with #1 on the bottom of the pile. Place the pile in your manilla folder. *Put this checklist on top.*

Final Draft Procedure: For your final draft, turn in every part listed on the writing process checklist BELOW the bolded line. Place each part in the order of the writing process checklist, with #8 on the bottom of the pile. Place the pile in your manilla folder. *Put this checklist on top.*

- ____ 1. **Planning** (date completed: _____); (date turned in: _____)
- ____ 2. **Rough Draft** (date completed: _____)
- ____ 3. **Response**
 Person #1: _____ (date received: _____)
 Person #2: _____ (date received: _____)
- ____ 4. **Revision:** denote the areas of revision on your draft *clearly*
- ____ 5. **Editing:** denote the conventions on which you concentrated *clearly* on your draft
- ____ 6. **Teacher Conference Draft** (date completed: _____); (date turned in: _____)
- ____ 7. **Rubric**
-
- ____ 8. **Teacher Conference** (date completed: _____)
- ____ 9. **Rubric:** the same one used at the teacher conference
- ____ 10. **Final Draft** (date completed: _____); (date turned in: _____)
- ____ 11. **Self-Evaluation** (date completed: _____); (date turned in: _____)

Another of my concerns was that I was just an error hunter who gave an overall grade based on the rubric. I plan to combat this problem by taking off the point totals on the rubrics. Instead, I will be using a +, $\sqrt{+}$, $\sqrt{\cdot}$, $\sqrt{-}$, - system to evaluate the essay requirements and to give an overall assessment (Appendix B). Prior to the scheduled teacher-student conference, I will circle 2-3 areas on the rubric on which I feel the writer should focus before s/he turns in her paper as a final draft. During the conference, I will discuss these concerns so that s/he is clear about how to improve those. I am going to focus on a smaller number of areas of growth so that the writer doesn't feel overwhelmed. The student will achieve much better mastery of these skills if s/he isn't asked to concentrate on so many at once.

A second way I plan to stray from being an error hunter is to provide some authentic responses of my own about the piece. I will start the scheduled teacher-student conference with 2-3 positive areas that I believe the writer has done well before I go into the areas of growth. I want them to know that I value the effort they've put into the piece and the skills they have mastered within it. In order to allow students to feel ownership about these accomplishments, I will start off by asking questions and using prompts similar to Linda Rief's "How can I help you?" I could use something like, "Tell me about how you got the idea for this part. I really liked it." Further, I am not going to require students to complete a reflection sheet over their teacher conference drafts prior to my reading their pieces. Sometimes the students had other concerns that we were not able to cover due to time constraints. I felt that we *had* to cover the parts on the reflection in order to value the work they did in completing that form. In retrospect, the concerns the students had beyond the reflection should have been my focus. These were the things that *really* mattered to the students; they came directly from the students' concern for creating a good piece of writing. Plus, I often noticed the students really didn't have three

concerns for revision or three for editing. Thus, they filled in those parts on the sheet in a half-hearted effort. They knew I expected those sections to be filled in, so they did that. But they didn't use it to make any significant changes to their teacher-conference draft, the main purpose of completing the reflection. Really, the only thing they learned in this scenario is to meet requirements and ignore their own learning. Lastly, my final assessment of the essay, which students will turn in after their teacher conference, will combine rubric factors and a positive, written response to the content. On a separate piece of paper, I will write the response and put the overall "grade," a +, $\sqrt{+}$, $\sqrt{-}$, or -. The rubric will reflect how I got that "grade."

3. A writing workshop should allow more student choice.

To meet the concern about choice of content, I am going to allow students to do their essays about any controversial topic that can meet the intent of the essay. For example, their research paper can be over any topic as long as they can find sources and comment about each source's opinion about that topic. They don't just have to choose "heavy" topics for this. I want them to take whatever they care about in their lives and investigate that. A way that I plan to help them stay rich in topics they are interested in writing about is to do a version of Atwell's "Writing Territories." In her territories, Atwell wrote down all of the topics she'd like to write about, the audiences she'd like to address, and the genres she would like to try or had already tried (121-22). One of the ways I'm going to start out the class is for students to make a list of issues they are for, unsure about, and against (Figure 3.1). We will periodically discuss these potential topics, why people feel the way they do and what others think of that stance. I will stress that this class is about expressing opinions, and as a group, the students will not always agree. But that exchange of ideas could help them solidify their stance or explore an issue/ topic

they wouldn't normally think or write about. This social contact supports Lev Vygotsky's idea of the social construction of knowledge, which is the basis for the inclusion of a writing workshop in many ways. In the book *Thought and Language*, Vygotsky expresses the importance of such classroom interaction: "Experience teaches us that thought does not express itself in words, but rather realizes itself in them" (251). Unless students have the chance to talk with their peers, they might not have the impetus to write. They might think about an issue, but not feel it has importance or relevance. When they see others care about a topic that they do, they want the chance to share their ideas with these people. Their writing becomes a meaningful way to communicate those ideas. They are able to define what they believe about the topic in their pieces, to "realize" their own ideas. Thus, I can build a more personal rapport and group dynamic with the students through allowing this choice and through discussing their writing territories.

FIGURE 3.1:

**Composition and Rhetoric
WRITING TERRITORIES**

Name _____ Period _____

I am for/ agree with. . .	I am unsure/ would like to know more about. . .	I am against/ disagree with. . .

The way I plan to free students of the five-paragraph theme form is to incorporate minilessons into my curriculum. Atwell believes that minilessons relieve the pressure a teacher puts on herself to try to conference with every single student every single day. They are a powerful tool for whole frames of reference when they are “authentic, appropriate, and engaging” (151). For example, all of my students will need to know what a thesis, thesis question, supporting points, and topic sentences are since they are writing in the form of essays. I plan to start out the course by doing minilessons over these. However, I won’t impress upon them that these things *have* to be in a certain order or be a certain length. The students will know what parts are essential to an essay, but they will have the power and choice on where to put them. I will also do minilessons about concerns that arise from the students’ writing and from their act of writing. If a lot of people are having difficulty with run-on sentences, I could do a lesson about semicolons and periods. If someone has written a particularly powerful and effective introduction, I can show that to students so they can get ideas about their own writing and see that everyone in the class is a “real” writer.

4. A writing workshop should not be completely silent.

I want the students to feel free to interact with each other in ways conducive to learning, which means that the writing workshop cannot be one in which the students are constantly talking at a loud volume or about things non-related to writing. Yet I also want them to feel unrestricted in their conversations over their writing. I will designate two tables in the area in the front of the room by the desks as the place where student writers can talk about their writing. I will allow one set of students to discuss a piece at a time. When they are done, they will need to

move back to their individual desk or computer. Knowing that other students need that resource and are waiting for their turn at the conference tables will encourage the pair to stay on task during the conference.

I will also stress to the students that they can ask quick questions to each other at their computers and desks, but that the volume needs to remain quieter here so that people can continue to work in an environment sensitive to all students' needs. One of the expectations I will stress at the beginning of the course, model in my own conferences and interactions with students, and enforce when needed is to use a quiet voice. But again, I want them to know that they are free to get the help they need; they just need to do it in a quiet manner.

5. A writing workshop has to have some tie to reading.

To meet this concern, I plan to require students to read throughout Comp. and Rhet. They may choose the types of texts they'd like to read. However, they all need to read relatively the same amount. For example, I am going to require that they read three texts per quarter. But if the student chooses not read a longer work (like a novel or non-fiction book), they will need to read eight magazine/newspaper articles of at least six pages each to count as one longer work. I'd like the texts that students read to remain faithful to the purpose of the class, either a) a persuasive piece or b) about a controversial topic. In order to help students find books they enjoy, I will provide a reading list of fiction/ non-fiction that we will continue to add to throughout the course (Figure 5.1).

FIGURE 5.1**Composition and Rhetoric
READING LIST: A STARTING PLACE**Fiction

1. *The Bluest Eye*, Toni Morrison: race
2. *Z for Zachariah*, Robert C. O'Brien: war
3. *The Kite Runner*, Khaled Hosseini: war, rape
4. *The Lovely Bones*, Alice Sebold: rape, heaven
5. *Angels and Demons*, Dan Brown: science and religion
6. *The DaVinci Code*, Dan Brown: religion
7. *My Sister's Keeper*, Jodi Picoult: biomedical ethics
8. *The House of the Scorpion*, Nancy Farmer: cloning
9. *When She Was Good*, Norma Fox Mazer: child abuse
10. *The Bell Jar*, Sylvia Plath: drug abuse, suicide
11. *Crank*, Ellen Hopkins: drug abuse
12. *The Red Tent*, Anita Diamant: religion
13. *Am I Blue: Coming Out from the Silence*, Ed. Marion Dane Bauer: homosexuality
14. *Annie on My Mind*, Nancy Garden: homosexuality
15. *Life in the Fat Lane*, Cherie Bennett: body image
16. *Good in Bed*, Jennifer Weiner: body image

Non-fiction

1. *Lucky*, Alice Sebold: rape
2. *My Forbidden Face, Growing Up Under the Taliban—A Young Woman's Story*, Latifa: war
3. *Reading Lolita in Tehren: A Memoir in Books*, Azar Nafisi: women's rights, war
4. *Wasted: A Memoir of Anorexia and Bulimia*, Marya Hornbacher: eating disorders
5. *Food and Loathing: A Life Measured Out in Calories*, Betty Lerner: body image
6. *Except for One Little Problem: Memoir of a Life in Hiding*, Joan Denson: homosexuality

To be sure that they are making meaning from their texts, I will require them to write a reader response letter about whatever they're reading. Nancie Atwell uses this type of response in her workshop. She believes that it reinforces the idea that students connect with their texts: "The subject of an academic journal isn't 'I' as in a diary, but in 'I-it': the relationship between the student and the subject" (283). The students will write letter about their opinions and feelings regarding what they're reading (Figure 5.2). They will need to turn one in each week, and I will respond each week. I am hoping that this sort of interaction with the text will transfer to the types of responses they provide each other. Currently, I require the students to respond to each other in letter form (Figure 5.3). I plan to keep this structure in the hopes that the repetition of the style will allow them to make their responses meaningful and real.

FIGURE 5.2 Reader Response Letters Invitation

August 24, 2005

Dear Comp. and Rhet. Student,

Your reader response letters are a place for you and me to talk about texts, writers, and controversies: the opinions of the world and how they're expressed. In these letters you'll share with me the thinking you're doing about your reading, and I'll write back a response to that thinking. These letters will document our travels in reading and learning this semester.

Your letters should be at least one page long (handwritten OR typed). Tell me about what you felt when you read the book. Tell me about any connections the book had to your life or your world (local, national, or global). Tell me about any connections you see to other literature, tv shows, or movies you've come into contact with. Tell me about a passage that you found particularly truthful or filled with advice. Tell me about what you noticed about how the author wrote. Tell me about what questions this book raises. Tell me what you think about the characters: what kind of people are they? do you like them? do you agree with their choices? Tell me what you do with this text as a reader. Ask questions or for help with your reading.

You must write at least one letter per week. Your letters are due to me by the end of class each Friday. However, you may feel free to turn in your letters at any time during the week. If you would prefer to turn your letter in every Monday because that works better with your schedule, I'm fine with that. But remember that Friday is the last day I will accept them as part of the quantity you need to produce every week.

You must use the letter format. Put the date you are turning in the letter in the upper right-hand corner. Use a greeting at the beginning of your letter and end with some sort of closing, just as you would any friendly letter.

You must include the title(s) of the text(s) your reading and its author(s) in your letter. Remember that the titles of books are underlined or italicized, and article titles of put in quotes.

I look forward to reading your letters, to seeing what's important to you, to find out what your choices are as readers. But mostly, I'm excited to interact with you and learn from you; what a wealth each one of you has to give.

Happy reading,
Ms. E.

 FIGURE 5.3

Composition and Rhetoric
POSITIVE PEER RESPONSE

Purpose: In order to be a good writer, you must also read what is written and respond to it personally; you must internalize the opinions/ beliefs of other writers like yourself. By responding you get a better feel for the structure of an essay, the development of ideas, and the topics/ issues about which others read. From your response, your peers know what's working well in their pieces, a valuable piece of the writing process.

Procedure:

1. Read the essay ALL the way through.
2. After you have read, go back into your peer's essay and underline ONE passage to which you were particularly drawn. Initial the passage you underlined.
 - Possible reasons for underlining are that. . .
 - you agree with the idea presented in that passage.
 - you have a connection to the idea in that passage.
 - you thought the passage held a common truth that people should know.
 - you believed that the passage was powerful; it made you evaluate your own beliefs/ values.
3. Based on the passage you underlined, type a letter to your peer about why you had such a *positive* response to that part of his/her essay.

Content

- Make your comments meaningful and put some real thought into what you write. That type of letter is what you will hope to receive back from your peers, so be sure to provide that same type for them.
- Somewhere in the letter state the title of the piece and its topic.

Friendly-Letter Format

- Put the date you are writing your peer in the upper right-hand corner of the letter.
 - Start out with some sort of greeting to address the writer.
 - End with a closing of some kind and sign your name.
4. Print a ONE copy of the response.
 5. Give your response to your peer along with the copy of his/her essay.

Conclusion

In closing, my Comp. and Rhet. students will be more successful writers through our joint effort in writing workshop. While it might be an adjustment for my students and me, the changes regarding writing process, authentic response, form and content in student writing, peer collaboration, and reading will be positive ones. They will create an atmosphere in which my students thrive. We will truly be able seek the ideal Donald H. Graves, author of *Discover Your Own Literacy*, aspires for every writer and reader: “ ‘Literate people have a passion for asking questions, both big and small, a hunger for learning new things and for making connections’ ” (qtd. in Kaufman 18). I want my Comp. and Rhet. students to make their passion for writing and reading palpable. I want them to ask questions about their world and find the answers through their writing. I want them to read about issues that matter to them and stretch their thinking even further. But most of all, I want them to celebrate who they are literate people, as readers and writers in the world. And I want my writing workshop to be the place that celebration begins.

APPENDIX A

Ewald (2005)		
Comp. and Rhet. STATUS OF THE CLASS		
Day: _____ Date: _____		
<i>Student</i>	<i>"Writing in Progress" (by title or topic)</i>	<i>Writing Process Status</i>
1		
2		
3		
4		
5		
6		
7		
8		
9		
10		
11		
12		
13		
14		
15		
16		
17		
18		

APPENDIX B

Ewald 2005						
School Controversy Essay RURBRIC						
Name _____						Period _____
<i>The student . . .</i>	+	√+	√	√-	-	
Achieves his/ her purpose						
1. Composes an effective thesis statement by: a) stating the school controversy, b) revealing his/her opinion about the controversy clearly, c) narrowing the thesis to one opinion, d) creating a clear open OR closed thesis						
Develops his/ her ideas fully						
1. Explains each supporting point: provides depth to ideas and brings ideas to life with examples						
3. Uses skillfull and logical reasoning						
Employs an organized essay structure						
1. Creates a lively attention getter that truly gains the reader's attention						
2. Provides clear, effective topic sentences that tie to the thesis						
3. Ends the essay with an effective conclusion by a) restating the thesis, b) providing final thoughts, and c) composing a final statement that provides closure and impact						
4. Uses transition words/phrases appropriately b/t major and minor parts of the paper						
5. Unifies all ideas within each paragraph (no tangents)						
6. Places ideas within paragraphs in a logical order (no repetition, all ideas about a topic are together)						
7. Relates all information to the thesis						
8. Places paragraphs in a logical, powerful order						

APPENDIX B, CONTINUED

Expresses him-/ herself well					
Skill #1:					
Skill #2:					
Skill #3:					
Adheres to Standard American English					
Convention #1:					
Convention #2:					
Convention #3:					
Double-Check: 1. Be sure your header, heading, and title meet MLA format. 2. Be sure your font is correct and matches in all areas of the document. 3. Be sure to cite any sources correctly within the essay and in a Works Cited at the end of essay, using MLA style.					

Works Cited

- Atwell, Nancie. *In the Middle: New Understandings About Writing, Reading, and Learning*. 2nd ed. Portsmouth, NH: Boynton/Cook Publishers, 1998.
- Broz, Virginia. Personal Interview. 18 July 2005.
- Burniske, R.W. "Creating Dialogue: Teacher Response to Journal Writing." *English Journal* 83.4 (1994): 84-87.
- Freedman, Sarah Warshauer. "Recent Developments in Writing: How Teachers Manage Response." *English Journal* 76.6 (1987): 35-40.
- Kaufman, Douglas. *Conferences & Conversations: Listening to the Literate Classroom*. Portsmouth: Heinemann, 2000.
- Rosenblatt, Louise M. *The Reader, the Text, the Poem: The Transactional Theory of the Literary Work*. Carbondale, IL: Southern Illinois UP, 1978.
- Vygotsky, Lev. *Thought and Language*. Trans. Alex Kozulin. Cambridge: MIT Press, 1986.
- Walshe, R.D. "What's Basic to Teaching Writing." *English Journal* 68.9 (1979): 51-56.
- Wesley, Kimberly. "The Ill Effects of the Five Paragraph Theme." *English Journal* 90.1 (2000): 57-60.