CHAPTER

4

Writing Processes in Theory

A writer cooks. Sometimes the heat is turned high. Ripe and sliced, various foods sputter in a hot, concentrated tablespoonful of motivation. The writer adds spice, a personal brand of it, and deftly stirs the ingredients, which exchange flavors and become something together that none could be alone. When the writer sets this dish on the table, readers respond with "oooohs" and "ahhhhs." "This dish," they say with satisfaction, "is pure inspiration."

At other times a writer can barely keep the heat on warm. One meager ingredient tries to simmer. The writer knows that several others are needed to make the dish complete. He's checked different sources and cannot locate what he needs. Furthermore, he's undecided about what spice to use.

But the writer doesn't fret over this dish that won't come together. He attends to other matters—plans future meals, checks something baking in the oven, perhaps even begins another dish on a different burner. Occasionally, however, he comes over to the stove to stir the bland dish, tasting a bit, maybe adding a little salt, a little pepper. Still, he knows there's nothing much of substance there.

The writer keeps coming back to the stove, though, and one time while he's stirring and tasting, he thinks of another ingredient he needs. He adds it quickly. The taste improves just a bit. But more important, the subtle change in flavor and texture now tells him what seasoning to use. The writer's mood lightens as he peels a generous supply of the spice and drops the pieces in, singing in a strong voice all the while.

Now, the dish bubbles slowly. The writer stirs. A distinct and pleasing aroma rises from the pan. This work is satisfying but tiring. He opens the refrigerator, reaches for a cool drink, and by chance discovers an ingredient he had stored away and forgotten. Quickly, he adds it and turns up the heat. He stirs the steaming dish, the bubbles sputtering now. He tastes and frowns. He removes some of the spice he added earlier. He tastes again, this time licks his lips. Perfect. And suddenly he thinks of an ideal complementary side dish.

Just before dinner, the writer wipes the stove to sparkling, sets the table precisely, and opens the wine to breathe. Later that evening, his guests, full and content, lean back in their chairs, sigh, and say, "That dish was pure inspiration."

Meals and pieces of writing come to completion in different ways. Cooks may use similar ingredients and utensils, yet prepare meals that differ vastly. Writers too. They all use pen and paper, often a typewriter, maybe a computer. And although they work in separate kitchens with variously stocked pantries, all writers create with the basic ingredient of language. But each writer has a personal brand of language, and each goes about the writing process uniquely. This is as it should be.

Despite this healthy diversity, writers go through similar processes and often complete them in the same order. All writers come up with ideas. They get these ideas into language on paper. They shape the language, adding, deleting, changing, and rearranging to communicate powerfully their intended and discovered meanings. They rid their writing of errors. They publish their work.

All writers, including student writers, develop a process (or processes) by which they work. Our responsibility as writing teachers is to help students learn personal processes for creating writing that enable them to create their best writing. Products are made by processes. The writing-cooking piece I opened this chapter with, for example, began with my observations of a third grader named Chad as he struggled to write a piece about his dog. I was struck by Chad's struggle because his previous piece about stamp collecting hadn't given him nearly as much trouble.

I decided to write about Chad and the fluency problem he'd encountered. I leafed through my research notes and found

the section describing Chad's behavior. As I reread my notes, the cooking metaphor presented itself to me. Like homemade pasta dough, the idea looked promising but needed to be worked with.

I wrote a draft with pen and yellow legal pad (revising occasionally during the drafting).

Next, I gave full attention to revision (drafting new portions as I revised).

Then, I corrected errors (revising here and there as I did).

Finally, I typed the piece (revising just a couple of words and phrases).

The next day I read the finished piece to my research colleagues.

That isn't what you read, though. Five months later, you see, I reread the piece and was amazed to discover so much more I needed to do with it. So I revised for further depth and clarity and sharpened my language. But you didn't read that version either. You read the one I revised and sharpened this morning, ten months later, over a year after Chad's memorable struggle.

Finished writing is produced by a process. With most pieces I write, the process is not nearly as long or involved. In fact, some pieces, like a note to a student or colleague, are completed within minutes, sometimes seconds, with no revision at all. Other pieces take longer, like a poem I've been writing about my father, who died when I was fifteen. I've been working on that for nine years.

It wasn't in English classes that I learned writing processes that worked for me. I had to learn them on my own. Most of my teachers in high school and college emphasized outlining, logic, and correctness. We rarely wrote in class. They tacitly taught a model of the writing process that usually ensured that we would produce ill-conceived, half-realized, and slipshod final products. In those classes I learned the "Due Friday" model of the writing process. It looked something like the scheme shown in Figure 4–1.

Of course, the teachers didn't consciously teach us to write by this process. They didn't teach us to write by *any* process. After they announced a due date, a format, and often a topic, they left us to figure out the mysterious process of producing a final written product. And everyone who turned in the

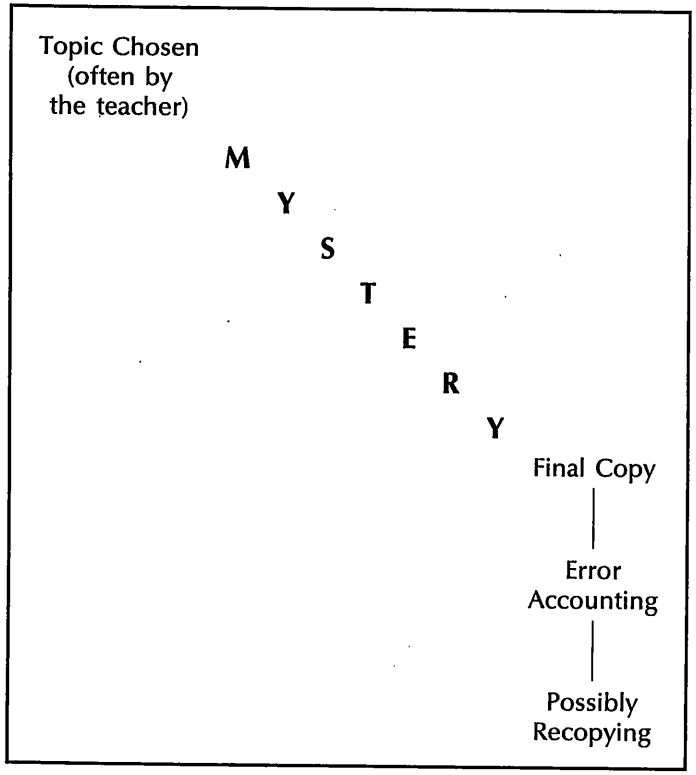


FIGURE 4–1

assignment did indeed develop a process for getting the writing done. For many of us, however, the processes we developed were "dysfunctional" (Calkins 1986, 15).

Many of us never jotted down our ideas before writing. Neither did we talk about our ideas with teacher and peers before or during writing. And always the due date loomed ominously ahead. The closer we got to it, the more overwhelming and intimidating it became. Few of us significantly revised the writing we turned in. Many of us produced a single draft. In college, students often slapped these together at one or two in the morning, sometimes just hours before

they were due. In high school, one of my cronies wrote his English papers during first-period American Government. He handed them in second period.

After we turned in our papers, the teachers finally intervened in the writing process. Up to our papers they methodically backed a truck sagging dangerously under its weight of writing dicta, punctuation rules, and usage prescriptions. When the truck was properly positioned, they mechanically raised the bed and dumped the load. Our errors of language, logic, and written convention were accounted for. If we were lucky, we could immediately put the paper out of sight (often in a wastebasket). If we were unlucky, we had to sort through the junk heap and rewrite a new, correct copy.

No doubt, the "Due Friday" model and its variations still exist today. But, happily, the burgeoning of research in the teaching of writing has produced plenty of useful and more accurate models of the writing process. Though such models do not represent *the* way writing is produced, they can help teachers guide students in forming productive strategies for producing their best writing.

One of the most useful models I've found is contained in *Learning to Write/Writing to Learn* (Mayher, Lester, and Pradl 1983). The authors propose that writers go through five stages when producing a piece: *percolating, drafting, revising, editing,* and *publishing.*

Perhaps the most unfamiliar term of the five is *percolating.* The authors use it instead of *prewriting.* Percolating prepares writers to write. They talk to friends about their ideas, mentally rehearse lines, read, lie on the couch or stare out the window and think. Idea and image incubate in the writer. Mayher and his colleagues eschew the term *prewriting* because it implies that these activities take place only before the first draft is begun.

Percolating, by contrast, occurs during the entire writing process. Writers percolate when they sit back from their drafts and reread and consider their words and thinking. Writers percolate when they read more about their subject or seek out someone for further talk. In addition, writers also percolate when they leave their writing desk. I do some of my best percolating when I'm in the swimming pool, lapping the meters in steady rhythm. Percolating also occurs, I suspect,

when writers are not actively thinking about the writing—when ideas, problems, and images are left to work in the rich compost of the subconscious.

"Percolating," write Mayher, Lester, and Pradl, "involves everything that happens to the writer apart from the actual setting of marks on paper" (5). I would like to expand their definition of this well-named and useful concept to include certain kinds of marking on paper. Under percolating might also come brainstorming and mapping activities that generate ideas and information, the drawing of diagrams or pictures, the jotting of notes, impressions, or trial lines—in short, anything done in relation to the piece of writing aside from producing a draft or revising one.

Drafting means getting a vision down on paper, cutting loose with it, so to speak, with little regard to refinement and correctness, but much regard to making meaning. The important thing in the drafting stage is to get words on paper—not necessarily the right words, but the first words. If descriptions are not fully rendered, if thinking is half-baked, if assertions are unconnected, that's fine. That's what a draft is for. When we learn to interact with our drafts, they tell us what needs to be expanded, refined, or expunged.

Matters of clarity, emotional payoffs, precise word selection, and fully developed, connected thinking are most often addressed during the *revising* stage. Writing is not live television. Writers can see their words again and again, can play with them and create new ones until the writing rings true. And the re-seeing will be clearer and sharper if the writer has the benefit of other pairs of eyes, if she gets response from real readers during the process of writing. In the case of students, those real readers should be their peers as well as their teachers.

"I think it helps to have someone your own age read your writing," wrote Karen, a sophomore. "They understand better what you're trying to say, and they make good suggestions that maybe an adult wouldn't have thought of."

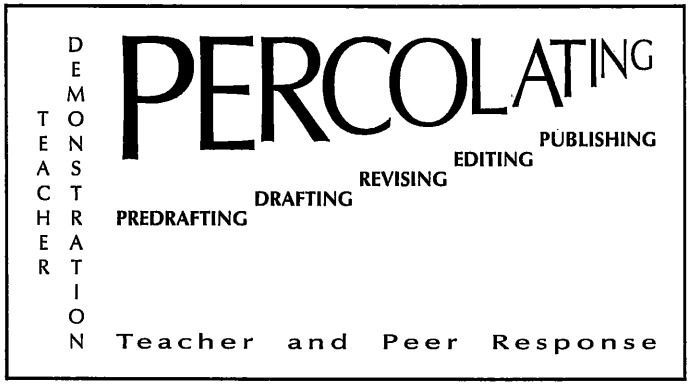
The *editing* and *publishing* stages of a writing process should arrive holding hands. To edit something that has no chance of publication wastes a writer's time; to publish something that hasn't been edited invites readers to dismiss a writer's words. Editing is necessary only when writers have said what they intended (or learned to intend) and are now ready to publish the writing in some way.

When writers are ready to publish, they want to present their audience the cleanest copy possible. They want spelling, punctuation, usage, and grammar to be standard in most instances. When variations from the standard occur, they do because writers are using them to serve their stylistic purposes. Any accidents of written discourse have been corrected. This is not mere courtesy. It is shrewd psychology. Peter Elbow has called all the rules and conventions of correctness "writing's surface" (1981, 168). It should be smooth, unrippled, unnoticed. Writers want nothing distracting readers from the meanings that lie in the depths of the writing.

Publishing, Mayher and colleagues explain, means "any public presentation" (6). Students must write for more than a teacher, pen in hand, hunched over a desk ready to cast judgment. Sharing their writing with others motivates students and teaches them that writing is a vibrant part of society. For students, publishing includes posting the writing on the bulletin board; sharing it with the class; performing or orally interpreting it during a school assembly; having it printed in a school or commercial anthology, newspaper, or magazine.

A writing process model I have adapted from the terms of Mayher et al. is shown in Figure 4–2. Because I believe with Mayher and his colleagues that percolating takes place throughout the writing process, I have included a *predrafting* stage in my model. This provides a place for those percolating

FIGURE 4–2



activities that occur before a draft is begun. I have progressively reduced the size of *percolating*, for its role diminishes the closer a writer gets to publication.

All along the process it is imperative that the teacher-crafter demonstrates to apprentices all the stages of the writing process. Teachers cannot merely preach process writing; they must do process writing and show that doing to students. Such practice creates clarity of purpose for everyone. It also develops mutual respect between teacher and students.

Undergirding every step of the writing process is plenty of teacher and peer response. When students share their writing amid the stages of its creation, they find out how their ideas strike others, what questions their words elicit from readers. My process model leads up, not down, to publishing, because carrying a piece to publication is a triumph, a celebration.

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CHAPTER

5

Writing Processes in One High-School Classroom

The best writing processes are flexible and organic. They bend and grow to meet a writer's needs. Teaching processes, too, are ideal when they are flexible and organic enough to meet the students' needs, and the teacher's. I heard a teacher say once, "In the classroom you can only do what you're comfortable with."

I agree with that, although some teachers have used a like philosophy to justify a slide into stubborn stagnation. Such teachers remain righteously ignorant of the latest thinking in their field. They refuse to try anything new because they may initially be uncomfortable with it. They cease trying to grow. And the profession is the worse for it.

I understand, though, that secondary English teachers' classrooms will reflect their personalities, histories, philosophies of education, knowledge of writing, commitment, and understanding of teenagers. Know me and you know my classroom. The following discussion represents how writing processes operate with students in one classroom—mine.

PREDRAFTING

I make assignments broad enough for students to stretch and find their own places, their own topics, their own approaches. I often assign something specific, such as a childhood remembrance, a persuasive piece, free-verse poetry, a character sketch, a satire, or a literary paper. Sometimes I assign simply