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Editor's Notebook: What Makes Good Writing?

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**EDITOR'S NOTEBOOK**

**What Makes Good Writing?**

Johnny, the ageless student who never seems to be able to learn as much as adults expect him to, is familiar on the educational scene. In the 1950s, we discovered that Johnny couldn’t read. In the 1960s, Johnny wasn’t learning science and math fast enough, which is why the Russians got to the moon first. In the 1970s, Johnny didn’t want to study foreign languages and he still couldn’t read. Now we discover that Johnny can’t even write. As we want to say, we will be in a better position to judge whether Johnny can or cannot write.

Modern theorists increasingly regard the composing of essays not merely as a means of recording what the writer already knows but as a mode of learning in itself. In this view, student writers should be actively engaged in exploring a subject. In the course of this exploration, they develop and modify their opinions; they see the need to explain the connections and relationships among ideas — in other words, they experience intellectual growth.

While the concept of essay writing as a mode of learning may not be applicable to every field of study, it can be of great value in psychology, political science, history, biology, and obviously in the analysis of literature — any subject in which the learner’s written response to what he or she has learned can lead to deeper understanding and even to speculative thinking.

Such an approach requires restraint on the part of the teacher as well as active engagement on the part of the student. If the teacher has too rigid an expectation of what the completed essay ought to be like, the students will channel their energies into imitating the model rather than trying to discover what form emerges from working out their own meaning.

The teacher who is convinced that writing can be a mode of learning will emphasize the ongoing process of composing, fully aware that this process can be messy and exasperating, with many false starts and blind alleys. Grammatical and mechanical correctness will necessarily be less important than quality of thought.

This is not to say that students should stop worrying about spelling and commas, or that they should loftily ignore the difference between *there* and *their*. But it is important to distinguish between surface correctness and those activities which are at the heart of the composing process: testing and formulating ideas, pursuing a line of reasoning, exploring connections, imagining alternatives. Proofreading, which follows the final revision, is a necessary step but takes place on an intellectual plane quite different from that of composing itself.

If we regard writing not only as a technique for presenting what is already known, but as a process of figuring out exactly what we want to say, we will be in a better position to judge whether Johnny can or cannot write.

*Barbara Apstein*