

HELEN MILLS

LANGUAGE AND COMPOSITION: THREE MASTERY LEARNING COURSES IN ONE CLASSROOM

People who learn to swim, play a musical instrument, or drive a car usually accept having to learn each step thoroughly and sequentially because they seem to recognize that accomplishment in each of these activities requires, indeed demands, mastering one step before going on to the next. They willingly study the theory and then apply what they have learned to practical problems, and they recognize that constant practice is probably the best way to acquire and retain effortless proficiency, to make the pattern of doing a part of themselves rather than a formula or procedure outside themselves which they follow mechanically. Yet when people are faced with learning to write reports or essays for college courses or for their jobs, many of them begin the writing course with a totally different attitude toward learning, protesting that they have always hated English, that they are bored trying to write reports, or that they have tried but know they cannot succeed—that nothing ever turns out the way they want it. However, most of these people *can* learn to write—if not during the semester in which they have enrolled, then in subsequent semesters after they have discovered that learning to write effectively is important to them and after they have learned to approach writing in the same way they approach other types of learning.

During the past five years at American River College, a two-year college in Sacramento, California, we have been able to help students overcome their negative feelings and to master writing step by step, by developing a sequential approach through individualizing instruction in sentence, paragraph, and essay writing—using self-instructional study units, self-pacing, open entry and exit, and tutors to help students master concepts and write effectively. Now we are offering all

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three sequential courses in one classroom in a course called Language and Composition in order to eliminate the stigma of "bonehead" English and the need for placement testing before students enter a writing class. The new program, now in its fourth semester, has been simple to organize and has proved to be effective in several ways.

Fourteen instructors, working in teams of two, are now teaching nine sections of 50 students each. As a result, we can accommodate twice as many students in each classroom during prime hours as we did before offering Language and Composition. Our program began in 1969 when I offered individualized instruction in sentence writing and developed all the course materials, which are now published.¹ A year later three other instructors individualized paragraph writing and wrote their own material. Then, working alone or in teams, we individualized several sections of essay writing. Finally, in 1974, seven of us, teaching in teams of two, offered four sections of Language and Composition, using my text for sentence writing and a series of study units developed for paragraph and essay writing.²

DIAGNOSTIC TESTING

To determine where students begin, we administer the Writing Pretest, which another colleague and I developed about four years ago. Interestingly, the results seem to be essentially the same every semester. Approximately one-third of the students qualify for essay writing, one-half for paragraph writing, and one-sixth for sentence writing.

Next, we give the Sentence Pretest, a test developed for the Building Sentences unit of the text. Each exercise consists of two sentences for students to analyze and directions for the students to generate similar kinds of sentences. So that the students are not blocked by some of the terminology, each exercise also contains an example. When we compared the scores on the Writing Pretest with those on the Sentence Pretest in the first semester, we discovered that in several cases there were wide discrepancies between the two test scores. As the semester progressed and we saw the students' paragraphs and essays, we ob-

¹Helen Mills, *Commanding Sentences* (Glenview, Illinois: Scott, Foresman and Company, 1974).

²Helen Mills, *Commanding Paragraphs and Essays* (Carmichael, California: Quest Publishers, 1975) (*Commanding Paragraphs* is being published by Scott, Foresman and Company in 1976).

served that the Sentence Pretest, in which they generated their own sentences, was a better predictor of their writing style than the Writing Pretest, which actually is a proofreading exercise. (However, we have not abandoned the Writing Pretest because we can score it at the end of the first class meeting by having students exchange papers; as a result, they know immediately what text to purchase and where to begin working.) The Sentence Pretest takes only about five minutes to score, but the person reading the students' sentences has to know exactly what he is looking for in each kind of sentence if he is to score the test rapidly. A chart listing all the test exercises on the first page where scores are entered gives a quick diagnostic picture of what the student's sentence writing problems are.

ASSIGNING STUDY UNITS

What happens next may sound complicated, mainly because we have all three beginning points in one class and the flexibility to assign subsequently whatever study units each student should complete to reach his goal of writing effective expository essays. However, making the assignments is actually simple. Those who receive 0-54 percent on the Writing Pretest begin working in the sentence writing text, which consists of 57 lessons followed by exercises in nine study units, each of which is followed by a Unit Review, Form A and Form B. If students receive 85 percent on the Unit Review, they go on to the next unit. If they do not, they get help from us and the tutors, correct their tests, and take Form B. To those who appear discouraged, we explain that they have already mastered 55 or 65 percent and that they have to learn only another twenty or thirty percent to demonstrate mastery of the unit. This positive approach helps tremendously. In addition, we ask them to repeat only those sections in which they have missed several items. As a result, most students pass the second time.

The second group, those who receive 55 to 65 percent on the Writing Pretest, begin Unit One of the paragraph writing text to study organizational patterns of paragraphs, and they also work on lessons in the Building Sentences unit over a nine-week period to prepare them for the Sentence Posttest, which they must pass with a grade of 80 percent. Those who receive 66 to 100 percent on the Writing Pretest begin essay writing; however, if they do not receive 80 percent on the Sentence Pretest, they must also complete lessons in the Building Sentences unit

for the first nine weeks of the semester. The students, as a result, learn to apply what they have learned in the sentence writing unit to the sentences they write for paragraphs and essays. In both the paragraph and essay writing courses the unit tests are the paragraphs and essays the students write. For paragraph writing we also use a paragraph posttest and an essay posttest to determine whether the students understand the organizational patterns of paragraphs and essays. The procedure throughout the semester is to give the students the course material they seem able to cope with and to evaluate their accomplishment.

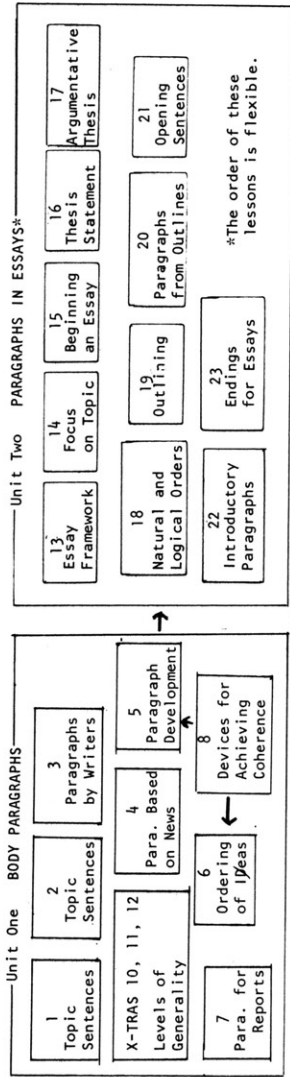
THE STUDY UNITS

Although the Language and Composition course consists of three parts—sentence writing, paragraph writing, and essay writing—we do not focus on only one aspect of any of these. Sentence writing, for example, cannot be only the study of grammar. Students also study the patterns of sentences and the relationship of ideas. They practice joining and embedding sentences, and they learn to use punctuation in relation to the grammatical constructions. Paragraph writing is also more than learning to organize ideas into paragraphs. Because paragraphs are also made up of sentences, the students review sentence writing to refine their writing style and study the relationship of ideas in several sentences. In addition, paragraph writing includes a study not only of body paragraphs but also of introductory paragraphs and endings for essays because part of the purpose of studying paragraphs is to prepare students to write them well for essays. And essay writing, though it concentrates on the writing of various kinds of essays, does not ignore the additional study of paragraphs and sentences.

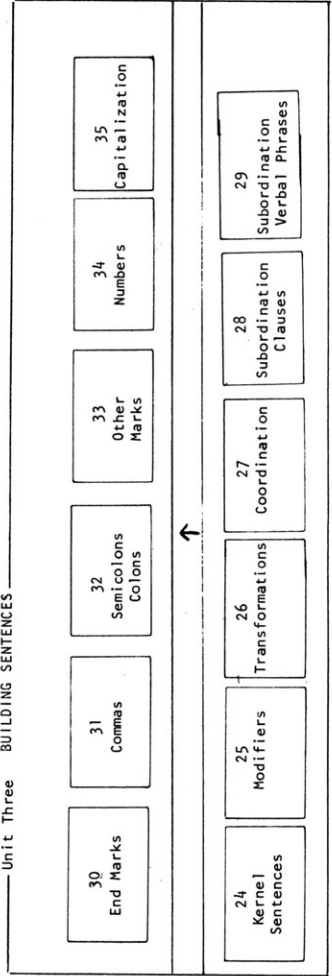
The sentence writing study units, based on structural grammar, cover two basic sentence patterns and nouns and verbs in the first unit. In the second unit students learn that modifiers are additions to basic sentence patterns and learn to add them to their kernel sentences. By the time they finish Unit Three, which covers three more sentence patterns, they are able to generate simple sentences to match any of the patterns. Unit Four covers coordination—compound sentences, coordinate adjectives, appositives, and the punctuation related to each of these. Unit Five covers pronouns and subject-verb agreement. By the time students reach Unit Six, they are able to begin to put variety into

COMMANDING PARAGRAPHS

Relationship of the Parts



Unit Three BUILDING SENTENCES



the writing, and when they study subordination in Unit Six, they really begin to be able to manipulate language to fit their needs. In this unit they learn that adverbial and adjective clauses are modifiers, additions to sentences, and that noun clauses are integral parts of sentences. They become fascinated with combining sentences in several different ways. At this point many choose to begin paragraph writing; however, those who go on with Unit Seven learn how to subordinate with verbal phrases. In Unit Eight they review all the punctuation they have studied in the first seven units, and in Unit Nine they learn about parallel structures, point of view, and editing techniques.

The accompanying chart shows the relationship of the study units for paragraph writing. At the bottom is the study of sentences, which is the basis for understanding the conventions of punctuation, lessons for which are just above. The writer is then prepared to proofread and edit what he has written with this knowledge, summarized in the points listed in Lesson 8, "Editing and Proofreading Checklist." The Building Sentences unit is the foundation for both the study of Unit One, Body Paragraphs, and Unit Two, Paragraphs in Essays. Within Unit One are lessons on understanding levels of generality and devices for achieving coherence, both of which provide background for writing topic sentences, developing paragraphs, and ordering ideas. Unit One, then, serves as the basis for understanding the essay, actually a macroparagraph, and prepares the student for Unit Two, which covers focusing on a topic, thesis statements, ordering of ideas, outlining, introductory paragraphs and endings for essays.

The essay writing units begin with a review of thesis statements and paragraphs that make up the essay. Then one unit demonstrates how students can write an essay based on an essay they have read. Still another explains how to read essays. The last unit gives a step-by-step approach to writing a research paper, and the remaining units give patterns for writing a problem-solution essay, comparison and contrast, scientific and technical reports, and an essay using analysis, division, classification, and definition. My students choose their own topics, then select the method of development that suits their topic best, and use the study unit as a pattern.

STRATEGIES

To help students become aware of the techniques they are using to

write their paragraphs and essays and to help us evaluate what they have written, we ask them to label the topic sentences in paragraphs and thesis statements in essays. In fact, we insist on reading the thesis statement and supporting topic sentences before they write the full essay. In this way we save time reading the preliminary drafts, and they save time by getting our approval before spending several hours writing the full paper. Because we are familiar with the general outline of the paper, we save time in evaluating the final draft.

For some paragraph assignments the students label the kinds of development they have used, the ordering of ideas, or repeated terms, pronouns and their antecedents, transitional expressions, and parallel structures. As they gradually go through these steps, they develop an increasing awareness of ways to make their writing clear and coherent, and they produce commendable paragraphs and essays.

Another very successful strategy is using levels of generality to determine and indicate relationship of ideas. I tried this approach because at least half of my students in other semesters could not understand primary and secondary supporting ideas. I think the words *primary* and *secondary* cause the trouble. However, the majority—at least 85 percent—have no trouble ranking ideas when they can use numbers to show relationship. For those who do have difficulty I have developed three supplementary lessons which seem to help eliminate the problem.

Still another strategy is having students bring in news clippings to use as the basis for paragraphs. With the details in hand, they do not spend time feeling frustrated and staring into space but go to work immediately on a topic that interests them. What they learn in the process of organizing the details for their own paragraphs is the difference between news writing and expository writing. Because they attach the stories to their paragraphs, we do not have to be concerned at that point with documentation. In addition, they get excellent practice in paraphrasing, in preparation for the research they do for later essays. Our bonus is being able to read paragraphs based on a variety of current topics instead of being confined to a limited number of assigned topics.

So that students understand our evaluation of organization and sentence structure, we have developed a series of five evaluation sheets which are duplicated on five different colors of paper to cover all the types of assignments they complete. The students attach one of these to each assignment. The color identifies quickly what assignment we are to evaluate. These sheets list the objectives for each assignment. For

example, we give points for adequate development of paragraphs, logical ordering of ideas, well-developed topic sentences or thesis statement, transitions between sentences and paragraphs, and so on. On the back of the evaluation sheet is a checklist of grammatical constructions and page numbers in the study units which they may refer to. If they do not understand the written explanation well, we then explain it to them and, if necessary, give them exercises to help them learn the concept. We subtract points for awkward phrases, shift in point of view, and some grammatical problems, but they may earn them as rewrite points for revisions; and we subtract points, which they lose, for punctuation and spelling errors, in order to encourage careful proofreading. Although some instructors believe that close evaluation of this kind destroys the creative spirit, we have found that students build confidence in themselves when they know what is acceptable and what has to be changed. Our role is that of editors helping them prepare their manuscripts for their audiences and helping them revise and refine so that they finally produce a polished paper.

Students may get as much help as they need while working on the preliminary drafts of the paper. However, they have to decide when the paper is completed. After we evaluate it, they may revise it once. If they are not satisfied with the final grade, they may substitute another paper for it. We do not emphasize grades, but we use them as indicators of the quality of writing. If a student has extreme difficulty on the first two papers but then improves greatly, we do not average all his scores but give him a grade representing his final accomplishment.

SELF-PACING

Another important strategy is self-pacing, allowing the students to work at their own speed so that they can master each unit before going on to the next. However, self-pacing is not without its problems. Some students take it as a signal to work only when they feel like it. Or they respond first to pressure in other classes. Naturally, this spells disaster.

We overcome this problem by preparing a number of calendars to show students when we expect them to reach specified goals and to hand in assignments. One calendar may schedule students to complete paragraph writing or six study units of sentence writing in nine weeks. Other choices are to complete nine units of sentence writing or the essay course in seventeen weeks. Each student chooses the calendar he

wants, and we try to help him stay on schedule. If we see, however, that he needs more time, we revise his schedule. If he allows himself to slip behind, we find out whether he has problems. If he has none, we urge him along by telling him that we are looking forward to reading his paragraph at the next class meeting or that it appears he is ready for a unit test. This individual attention is sometimes all the student needs to quicken his space.

CONDUCT OF THE COURSE

Classes meet for six hours a week either two or three times a week. During the two- or three-hour period we instructors, assisted by one paid instructional assistant and two or three tutors earning college credit, move about among the students, working with individual students or small groups. Because the study units provide the "lecture," we seldom address the whole group after we have introduced the course on the first day. We do, however, have small discussion groups to answer questions or to talk about essays whenever the need arises, and we encourage the students to let others read what they have written so that they can get an audience reaction. During the class we help students understand the lessons and exercises, choose topics to write about, review our evaluation of papers, and revise paragraphs and essays, we also use this time to read and approve thesis statements and topic sentences, and indicate where students may find information about punctuation and grammar. In other words, we try to respond to each student's need as it comes about.

OPEN ENTRY AND EXIT

Because we have several work schedules, students may enter or leave the courses at any time during the semester. It is no problem to get them started because we can administer the Writing Pretest at any time. Then we assign them appropriate materials, and they work at their own pace. Those who do not complete all the units register the next semester and begin where they left off.

AWARDING UNITS OF CREDIT

My teaching partners and I initially divided the Language and Composition course into ten modules, each consisting of a varying number of study units. Our intention was to give students one unit of credit each time they completed a module. Our colleagues, however, felt that the paragraph writing and essay writing courses should remain three-unit courses. As a result, we give modular credit in only the sentence writing course. If students do not complete paragraph writing or essay writing by the end of the semester, we give them IP (In Progress), and they return the next semester to pick up where they had left off. The number of units a student may earn in one semester varies widely. The highly motivated ones earn two units for sentence writing and three units for paragraph writing in one semester, or three units for paragraph writing alone, or three units for paragraph writing and three units for essay writing. The students with poor writing backgrounds or full time jobs may complete only one or two modules in one semester.

TUTORS

Although a good part of the strength of this mastery learning program lies in having sequential, comprehensive study units and unit tests available, another important part is having at least one instructor or tutor for every ten students. Most of our tutors are students who have completed one of our courses or who have come from high school qualified for essay writing. They register for a course called Teacher Aides in English; in one semester we have as many as 75 to 90 students enroll. They earn one unit of credit for each 54 hours they spend in class tutoring and one unit for meeting with the instructor in charge of the class approximately one hour a week during the semester. A few of our tutors are upper division and graduate students at California State University, Sacramento. They enroll in tutoring classes there and also earn units of credit for the time they spend in our classes.

To get an adequate number of tutors, we recruit from among the students we have in class. Those we ask are flattered to be considered capable of tutoring, but they sometimes wonder whether they can actually cope with the responsibility. Almost immediately they begin working even more seriously on their writing assignments so that they can become effective tutors.

Because tutoring is a learning experience, we do not expect our tutors to be experts. We are always available in the classroom to answer their questions. In addition, we ask them to read papers we have evaluated so that they can understand how we have determined the number of points the student receives. Then we ask them to grade two or three papers a week. As we make the final evaluation on these papers, we note what the tutors have written and then discuss the papers with them as well as with the students who wrote them.

RECOGNIZING STUDENTS' INDIVIDUAL NEEDS

I decided in 1969 to individualize instruction in sentence writing because of the variety of writing problems the students in a single class had. Investigating the reasons why they had not had adequate preparation in the first twelve years of school, I learned that some had been in overcrowded classrooms where they did not get enough individual help, or where teachers could not possibly grade all the written work. Some of their teachers were not adequately trained to teach writing; others had been forced to teach English even though it was not their major. Many of the students had passed from one English course to the next with a grade of D. Some had learned English as a second language. Others had been transferred from one school to another because their parents had moved frequently. A large number read no books outside of school and had reading problems. One of the consequences was that the students characterized themselves as "dumb"; they were sure they could never hope to make more than a C in the class. I recognized that I had no alternative but to offer a very basic course in which students had time to master a single concept and apply it before they could go on to the next one. In addition, I felt I could help improve their self-concept by awarding a grade of B for an 85 percent score on unit tests.

I did not realize it at the time but Benjamin Bloom, J. D. Carroll, and others were writing in the 1960's about students' individual differences. Carroll, for example, said in 1965 that some students learn four times faster than others and pointed out that teachers who ignore these differences will have some students who cannot cope with the material and others who are bored.³ Bloom in 1968 pointed out that "most students

³J. P. Carroll, "School Learning Over the Long Haul," *Learning and the Educational Process* (Skokie, Illinois: Rand McNally & Co., 1965).

(perhaps over 90 percent) can master what we have to teach them, and it is the task of instruction to find the means which will enable our students to master the subject under consideration.”⁴ My experience with the students in the sentence writing class supported Bloom’s and Carroll’s contentions.

In the years since I began my program, I have also recognized that the biggest problem in writing may be within the students themselves; some lack the maturity and self-discipline to write competently until they reach college and then may have writing problems the first year or two there. Margaret Mead would blame this lack of maturity on our society, which, unlike other cultures, keeps the majority living as children at least four to six years beyond puberty. This delay may hinder them in their early teens from thinking logically or solving problems; parents continue to make decisions for them. The concerns they have are narrowed to their own immediate worlds. Their writing, which Josephine Miles says is evidence of the students’ ability to think,⁵ reveals their inability to handle abstractions and to think logically. Sentence structure is immature; language is extremely informal, filled with current slang because they lack the vocabulary to express their ideas in Standard English. They reveal the narrow confines of their worlds when they write topic sentences, such as “Floating down the river in a raft is a fun sport” or “Swimming makes you healthy,” or they stare into space because they cannot think of something to write about.

HOW THEY LEARN TO WRITE

In working with the students the first few years, I became increasingly aware of the differences in learning rates and educational backgrounds. Some are very capable and highly motivated enough to complete writing assignments with a minimum of instruction. Because they have read widely most of their lives, they have good vocabularies and write mature sentences. Asking them to write informally about a topic or to prepare several pages of jotted notes presents no problem for them. They have ideas and willingly take a stand on issues. For

⁴Benjamin S. Bloom, “Learning for Mastery,” *Evaluation Comment* (Center for the Study of Evaluation of Industrial Programs, University of California at Los Angeles) 1, No. 2 (May, 1968).

⁵Josephine Miles, “What We Already Know About Composition and What We Need to Know,” *California English*, (September 1975), 14.

them free writing is easy and enjoyable. What they usually have to learn is to organize their ideas into paragraphs and essays by learning appropriate patterns and to refine their writing style. The study units I developed give them these patterns, and with a little practice and guidance as they write and rewrite, they become very adept writers.

Generalizing about the reluctant writers, however, is almost impossible because they vary greatly in learning abilities, educational background, and reasons for lack of motivation. As a result, a guided approach to writing seems best for them. Not only do they have to learn to comprehend concepts, but they also have to apply what they learn to their own writing, steps that Benjamin Bloom has detailed in his *Taxonomy of Educational Objectives*.⁶ We also then have a fairly concrete means to evaluate them and to praise them for their accomplishments. The students have to be made to feel that their ideas and their ways of expressing them are worthwhile, and they have to learn that we are their allies. If we let them write without guidance and support, we might liken ourselves to an irresponsible physician who would send a patient to a pharmacy to choose whatever medicine he wishes from the shelves; the problem is that some medicines might not help him at all, and others might kill him.

Although some teachers I talk with believe this guided approach is too highly structured and inhibits creativity, I have found that it actually is liberating because it helps a student develop a sense of judgment about his writing. For example, one student, smiling broadly, asked me to read a paragraph for her fifth assignment in a ten-week period. My immediate reaction was that it was excellent, and I told her so. She said, "I knew you would say that. I really know how to write!" Then she talked about how awkward and self-conscious she had felt when she had first come into the class. She wrote very informally—a string of ideas expressed in casual language, separated occasionally by dashes. Now she knew how to select a topic, relate supporting ideas to it, maintain a consistent point of view, and use transitions. Though she did not realize it, her experience was not unique. It is repeated dozens of times each semester, but for each student it is very special.

As students learn the difference between general and specific ideas, they begin to think logically because they begin to see the relationship of ideas to one another. When they begin to understand the patterns of language and the relationship of ideas in sentences, para-

⁶Benjamin S. Bloom *et al*, *Taxonomy of Educational Objectives, Handbook 1: Cognitive Domain* (New York: David McKay, 1956).

graphs, and essays, writing no longer seems to be a mystery, and they notice that they can more easily understand what they read. As a result, they read more and then increase the number of topics they want to write about. While writing and rewriting, they recognize that they are developing a fluency with language and gaining control as they become well-acquainted with organizational patterns that work. Even a large number of the students who feel extremely inadequate at first gradually gain self-confidence as they experience a continuing series of little successes.

IMPEDIMENTS TO GOOD WRITING

Although most of the students gradually learn to write, not all of them move through the course smoothly and steadily. For example, they may learn how to generate a topic sentence and then build a paragraph to support it, but their sentences may be poorly written, with as many problems as the long list of correction symbols indicates are possible—grammar, syntax, spelling, punctuation, vocabulary. Sentences vary in length; however, the short ones are frequently fragments, and the long ones sometimes are a hopeless tangle because the students do not understand the meanings of the connectors like *consequently* and *although*, because they subordinate the wrong part of the sentence or link two ideas that are not related, or because they do not know how to eliminate unnecessary words. Some are discontented with their writing style. They feel clumsy and want to know how they can write like a professional. Others cannot see what their problems are. Even when they read one of their involved sentences aloud, it makes sense to them, and they are able to explain what it means, but they are not able to see why the sentence is faulty or illogical. Their paragraphs may begin with an acceptable topic sentence followed by a related supporting idea, but the remainder may consist of a number of generalizations, information they think is important but which they cannot relate to their main idea. If they attempt essays, they have the same kinds of problems—only more of them. However, if they are motivated to learn, they frequently can improve their writing greatly in a semester or two.

Some who should succeed drop the course for a variety of reasons. They may find writing, especially essay writing, “too much work.” They may work 40 hours a week and try to carry 15 units of college work

besides. Or they may enroll in 17 to 20 units instead of the usual 12 to 15 units, then find they cannot complete all the homework. They may not be able to see the immediate application of the writing techniques to the courses they are taking. They may be determined to stay with paragraph writing or essay writing even though their diagnostic test scores and their written work indicate they need introductory work, then give up suddenly when they cannot complete the assignments. They frequently enroll in college classes only until they find a job. Although we lose people like these during a given semester, a number come back the next semester or a year later, saying they know what they want, and then they work energetically.

Some who enter have had no writing experience at all in previous schooling, or they have had bad experiences with writing assignments. For example, one man in his early twenties who was having trouble writing his first essay resisted accepting help for a few weeks, then finally began asking questions. The only papers he had previously written were assigned to punish him. As he struggled to write his paper, I suggested that he might be able to get information by going to the library to read articles; however, he appeared very reluctant to go even though he had attended the orientation our librarians give for writing students. When I asked whether he would like me to go with him, he nodded yes immediately. Fortunately we were able to find a number of useful sources. He worked energetically another week, disappeared for three weeks, then came in to tell me he had found a job but that he would be back some time.

A second young man, whose first paper was a series of generalizations even though he had used some source material, determined to produce a really good paper the next time. He came in with several pages of handwritten notes and asked for help in organizing them because he had never used notes before to write a paper. He marveled at the amount of information he was able to gather. After three or four class meetings in which he got help each time, he produced a well written, well-organized, informative paper, and he was thrilled with the experience.

THE KEY TO A SUCCESSFUL PROGRAM

Although our program may appear at first glance to be restrictive because it is structured, it actually is flexible enough to meet the needs

of each student. The carefully developed structure is a comfortable framework that helps us maintain our perspective even though every one of our students may be working on a different assignment, and it also allows us to make any changes that are necessary as the semester progresses. Even though some of my material has been published, I recognize that a text is limited in its scope and that I will have students from time to time who will need something besides what the book offers. Because we stay flexible, adapting constantly to the needs of the students, we are able to maintain a relaxed atmosphere where students, tutors, and instructors form a complementary triangle.