

COACHING WRITING

My writing class consists of interviewing, coaching and directing students to write well. As an experienced stage director and speech teacher, I train the students in physical and vocal performance techniques so their writing is effectively presented in the classroom. Like a director of an improvisatory group, I advise students on how to place and organize words to make them work effectively. This article consists of a listing of the types of advice I give students and examples of students developing their skills.

Students physically act out and verbally describe people they would like to be or not like to be and visits to places they would like or wouldn't like to visit. The focus of the class is on how to describe being a body and looking out from a body. We focus on the relationship between a word and a sight, with an emphasis on the difference between the student and the sight involved, i.e. what would you have to change to become that other person or thing. A change of person would involve changes in body, clothing, position, and environment, since you always are a person in an environment. When looking at a person, the eye takes in a person clothed and surrounded in a space, with things and space and people before it and behind it and around it and above it and below it. When the teacher uses this technical guidance as a way of coaching and directing a student's visual and verbal performance, the students realize the value and truth of the teacher's instruction because it leads directly to successful student performances and accomplishments that the other students directly respond to and so participate in the success of.

The technical advice I give students, in interview or dictation, includes: pick places that illustrate the values you place on or recognize in your life; compare good experiences with bad experiences; find what makes the person or place you describe different than any other

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person or place in the world; place people at the points that describe most amply the persons and places you are describing: when you see something or someone, write about it completely at that moment, so the moment happens to the reader as much as it would have happened to the reader if he had been there; pick out and look over objects and places that are as unique as possible to the experiences you are describing, and eliminate objects that do not contribute a unique and original experience to the reader's life; keep in mind that sights and passages through spaces are essential forms of human experience, based on the eye and the human body's ability to walk through the world; remember, too, that the eye either watches someone or something doing something or other, or looks around in space; see that actions continue in the same space, each event responding to another, so that a human event grows around the place where the reader is placed; place the reader into the experience you are writing about so that the reader can share the values the writer has discovered in living his life.

Sometimes I interview students, helping them find unique and original material based on where they spend their lives; sometimes I dictate papers on creating and moving the human body through unique spaces; sometimes we make up stories together, each person contributing objects, characters and events. Students are taught to create strategically viable spaces and fill them in, so the reader feels each eye movement he makes leads to a striking sight or experience, something only a wise life or a good writer or artist or society provides.

Students are guided against words that express values that the reader can't share because the writer has written no experiences that would create these values in the reader, words that quickly mention places and events without creating and contributing unique forms or aspects to the mentioned experiences, words that just label and mention experiences, causing the eyeball and body to be running all over in time and space, without these changes in orientation leading to unique experiences. The following is an example of a student with reasonable grammar capabilities growing in writing technique under this method of instruction.

TRINIDAD BEACHES 1

By Pearl Orakwue

If you want lots of sunshine, sandy beaches and friendly people who go out of their way to be helpful, Trinidad is the place for a vacation. This is

where my family and I spent our vacation this year and we enjoyed it immensely.

The flight from New York was smooth and comfortable. On the way I kept imagining what the place would be like. I had read and heard so much about it from my friend who had visited there before.

The plane landed at Port-of-Spain the capital in the late afternoon and the place was everything that I had imagined. The sky was pale blue, I could just see traces of the bright orange sun sinking behind a white cloud. There was a balmy breeze blowing and it felt so good to inhale the fresh clean air.

We were driven to our hotel by a taxi driver who pointed out some of the important places such as the Queens Park Savannah, which is equivalent to our Shea or Yankee Stadium, only soccer and cricket are played there rather than baseball. He also gave us a quick rundown on the history of Trinidad some of which we already knew.

Trinidad is an oblong shaped island lying on the North East coast of Venezuela, SA. in the Caribbean Sea. It has an area of 1864 square miles. Its population is a little over one million, of which a little more than half are of African descent. The rest are mainly East Indians with a sprinkling of Chinese. Columbus discovered it for Spain in 1492 but the English later conquered it. It gained its independence in 1962. English is the main language although in the country districts Spanish is still spoken by the elderly people.

For the rest of our stay, what impressed me most were the beaches. Everything was so natural and peaceful—the golden sand warmed by the sun through your toes as you walked on the beach, the tall coconut palms swaying in the breeze, and the water was so clear and clean you could see your feet when you stood in it.

We also took in some night spots and it was a wonderful change dancing to the beat of the calypso. This vacation was one of the best I ever spent.

In a bad paper, spaces are used up quickly; the eye is always jumping, and so is the body, back and forth, without experiencing anything everywhere; “we also took in some night spots. . . .” is a typical example—in order to do so, you would have to enter and exit many times, not to mention taking cabs all around town (I would mime this in class to show why this paper doesn’t work), and yet the writer, having forced the reader to consider all this movement in time and space, doesn’t give the reader any experience of being in any special club; in bad writing, the writer is forced to mention new things all the time because everytime the writer mentions a thing, not knowing what to do with it, she is forced to go on to something else. Experiences are mentioned that don’t in any way add to the reader’s experience, as for

example: “we were driven to our hotel by a taxi driver who pointed out some of the important places. . . .”—this is what I call useless traveling, since the reader has no idea what the hotel is like, what the cab driver is like, or what most of the important places are; the student constantly creates spaces that are impossible to experience, such as, “. . . the place was everything I had imagined (that’s called leaving the reader to his own imagination, or not writing). . . . on the way I kept imagining what the place would be like. . . . For the rest of our stay. . . . everything was so natural and peaceful. . . .”

In general, if a student can’t begin to create a space within three eye movements, the paper is lost. It would be as if I were to say to you, look behind you, and you turned around, and there was nothing there; and I said, come here with me, look at this, and there was nothing; and I said look over there, and there was nothing there either. By that time, as in a student paper, you would realize I was wasting and misusing your attention. There is almost nothing in the description that is specific to Trinidad—after all, New York occasionally has pale blue sky, traces of bright orange sun sinking behind a white cloud, and even, occasionally, fresh clean air. A coconut tree is probably more common to Trinidad than New York City, but even here, if you’ve never seen one, then her mentioning one won’t do the student any good in communicating an experience to you, since you won’t know what to imagine when the student mentions the word in her paper.

Technically, mentioning “Port-of-Spain the capital” is a big mistake, and I would make a big deal about this in class. The student has no intention of writing anything about the capital particularly, and so she is carelessly opening a huge space in two words that she has no intention of using for the whole paper. “Sandy beaches” is a big mistake—if you use that phrase, you might cut to several beach scenes immediately.

The worst part of the paper, of course, is called “cut to a reference book,” and, sadly, is the only type of writing many students know how to do. The reference book has nothing, really, to do with what the student wants to write about or knows about, and is certainly not written in the style of a taxi cab driver. Taxi cab drivers can usually at least try to think of something interesting to say. I hope the typical Trinidad taxi cab driver hasn’t sunk this low. Also, since paraphrase of any sort is a borrowing of some of the form of the work you are referring to, it undermines the challenge and possibility of your learning how to write as a personal skill. Reference books do have a useful structure, but knowing when and how you want to use them is an important matter.

In a second version of this paper, the student found something to look at: coconut trees. This was a great achievement, and was used as paragraph two in her third version of this paper.

In her second version, the student made a big mistake by writing “we arrived in the late afternoon. . . .” and then by going back to New York on her fifth sentence, and by writing “it seemed like paradise” at a moment when she had not even begun to create a place for the reader: “We arrived in the late afternoon and the place was everything that I had imagined. It seemed like paradise after the hot muggy city I had just left. . . .” The reader both doesn’t know what paradise looks like and doesn’t know what Trinidad looks like. It is like describing something as beautiful, something the writer has every right to feel, since the writer has been there, but which the reader has no ability to feel, since the reader has no idea what the place is like.

The student attempted this third version later in the semester.

TRINIDAD BEACHES 3 by Pearl Orakwue

I thoroughly enjoyed my vacation in Trinidad last summer, a rewarding and fulfilling experience that made me feel very close to nature. There was a slight trace of the orange sun sinking behind some clouds when I arrived. The balmy breeze whispering at my skirt gave me the feeling that the sea was not too far away.

On my way to the beach the following morning, I could not help noticing the miles and miles of coconut palms that grew on the grey sandy soil that lined the roadway. They were all approximately 100 feet tall, with slender trunks and light brown barks. There were notches about one inch wide around the circumference of the barks at distances of every eighteen inches all the way to the top of the trees, where the wide spread branches were located. These ringed notches were helpful in climbing the trees during harvest time. The bunches of green fruits, each about the size of a football and each bunch consisting of about eighteen fruits, were located at the very top of the trunk, resting between the branches. From a distance, the grove of trees looked like a group of dancing ladies, with their slim, graceful trunks and long overlapping skirtlike branches swaying in the breezes.

Las Quevas, the beach I visited, was the most beautiful I have ever seen. To feel the sparkling grey sand, warmed by the noonday sun, slipping through my toes like tiny pearls as I walked barefooted on the beach was quite an experience. I walked for more than a mile and did not cover the

entire beach. There were little thatched roofed shelters opened on all sides for people who preferred to stay out of the sun, and scattered between the shelters were a few coconut palms. The water was a clear blue, very warm and tranquil. When I stood up to my shoulders in it, I could see my feet among the clean white pebbles at the bottom. The entire scene reminded me of a picturesque postcard. Someday I would like to return there to explore more of the island's beauties.

The writer is now writing decently. This is a clear four-location paper. You experience the moment of arriving, and even have a skirt on at the moment—in other words, the writer is immediately building you into her experience, and building an experience around your/her body. “On the way to the beach. . . .” is well chosen location, giving the reader something unique to see, and the writer creates a full sight there. She later chooses a particular beach, tells you what it feels like to walk along it, gives you a glance at the shore, turns your eyes to the water (clear blue), moves your body into the water (very warm), and gives you a human reaction to the water now that you are in it (tranquil). You know exactly how your eyes, shoulders and feet are related to the water, the bottom of the water, and the pebbles, and what the pebbles look like. You are built into the experience, which identifies your mind with the writer's mind, and you think something that you might not have thought of by yourself. Since the experience of Trinidad is, from the writer's point of view, the experience of going to the beach, the writer withdraws you at this climactic point, having led you from the moment of arrival to the moment of submersion.

Technically, there are two minor leaks, meaning places where the writer touches on experiences that the reader is not given an opportunity to experience (“did not cover the entire beach” and “to explore more of the island's beauties”), but these are quite minor. Minor points, however, are what usually make or break writers. I don't think there is any need for the student to work on this experience any further. I only point these out to a student to increase sensitivity in the student to knowing exactly what her words are doing for or against her at any given moment. I was not aware during the class that the student had regularly returned to this particular self-chosen paper, and was very grateful to her for presenting me with this modest but attractive model of her growth.

Grades are : xbaXCBADE. A small x is a small paper of no technical competence; a large X is a large paper of no technical competence. Any x grade increases your average by adding to your other grades, but x's

themselves amount to nothing. When this class is working well, students grow slowly and surely through the semester up the grade scale, a balance of quantitative and qualitative considerations. D's and F's are serious warnings and serious statements to the student, only given after a student has had a chance to develop from an assumed and non-penalized original non-competence. (In a course where the student is expected to work in such an original, direct and public manner, no cheating can be allowed. Formally, any cheating flunks the paper and the course. However, students may be given one second chance, but never the same grade they would have achieved otherwise. Students will never expose their difficulties and incompetencies as much as this course demands unless they know that they are not expected to be writers until the teacher has taught them how, and that all the successes of fellow students in the class are live achievements, not library imitations.)

Student progress in this class is based on students' growing respect for each other's achievements, and the discovery that each could do so well. Students' papers are read in class; papers that earn enormous respect are analyzed for their technical skills; papers that are good or bad are acted out or directed to show how they use or waste and fail to use the attention of the reader as a viewer of a human situation.

Grammar is graded numerically, and a careful record is kept of all types of student mistakes. Exercises are done verbally on primary dynamic problems, like the period, comma, word reference, and word usage. My grammar exercises are based on reducing and expanding positive and negative grammatical structures, in other words, correct and erroneous usage, over the class, using its imagination, and then having the students continue this work on their own papers until grammar is mastered.

Reduction means making something unbelievably simple. Expansion means making it awesomely grand. Standard important forms, always varying with the class, include the following:

Phrases before the subject, involving long ones, followed by a comma:

On the very day that a young man I met on my vacation at Spring Lake decided he would write me a long-overdue letter, I . . .

Short phrases involving many separations by commas:

Last Thursday, just after midnight, high above Mount McKinley, where I was walking my dog, Dover, whom you all know, I saw. . .

Phrases between the subject and the verb, which have commas before and after them:

Jack, the man wearing that green hat, is. . .

Differentiation of the above from the long subject:

The man wearing that green hat is. . . .

Explications of explications that are part of the same sentence:

I met that man from Vienna, a wonderful city in Austria, a country in Europe, a continent I have visited more than I have visited Asia, a land mass that borders the Pacific Ocean, where I once fished with my father, an old man who once taught me tennis, a sport I enjoy more than the sport of grammar, which I enjoy as much as making love, cutting classes and drinking beer. He said to say hello to you.

The usage of words that define the meanings of previous words with incomplete meanings:

This is the bridge that was built by the same man who built the bridge that we could see from the bridge that we were standing on at about this time last year.

It is important at times to go to the infinite with each example. Stopping short doesn't make an impression. I have seen students stare at an example on the board as if it were one of the ten wonders of the world, and actually gather around it, as if it were a mutation or an accident, in awe. Exercises can be based on doing things right or wrong, so that the student develops an intense and clear feeling when either is happening in one of his papers.

Imagine, now, one of these exercises being done by a group of students. There are twenty-five in the class. After each student has added one phrase at a time, 496 phrases have been added to a sentence without (that's the exercise) anyone (Oh, horror!) accidentally starting a new sentence, and all that pressure, worse than in the last game of the World Series, is on the poor student facing the task of adding phrase 497!

Naturally, all the work of making up the actual sentences should be the students', working in sequences with each other. Students are free to change the mood and direction of the content at will, making it suddenly sad, funny, sensible or outrageous. Students may express anything they feel or don't feel in these exercises, change directions in any way, and any student who finds a good way to undermine, develop, or expand the exercise is rewarded with the admiration and appreciation he earns. Given the proper encouragement, students can do astoundingly creative things in these exercises, creating remarkably poetic and moving maneuvers, and the opportunities for power and effect are so great that anti-academic students often join in with great and successful social and academic results.

After the class has begun to improve its grammar and increase the

size of its experiential writing papers, the instructor is free to move on to more abstract forms of writing: specialized writing, which limits attention to certain types of entities and eliminates all other forms of attention; technical writing, which is intended to give such a complete picture of a process that any person can both visualize and really accomplish the process; intellectual writing, exploring the world to decide which of all possible values and ideas are applicable and productive, and which of all possible ideas and values are inapplicable and counterproductive; and writing about writing, where the writer is reorganizing and presenting material that he has found in books and other written material.

Students in the class can progress from an inability to write at all to talented and moving confidence. One student began unable to write even competent sentence fragments, and these only under the pressure of the class. Here are the only three sentences his first paper consisted of and four sentences in class work written by him about the moon.

The brilliant, admirable, sophisticate, tedious,
A lovely mother with admirable patience, sweet harth, and unforgettable
dedication
Because was snowing, and the steam was not working, and the window
was broken I got could
It look as a while ball hanging
I wonder how the man been walking there
It gives a lighth to us during the night
It is to far away

A few weeks later, the student was writing long, complex papers and beginning to master the language:

. . . .As my Father and I got to Puerto Barrias, harbor, Lacated, in the North Atlantic zone of Guatemala, C.A., we got a small 20 Ft. Long Motor Boat the Port-Authority. . . . We continued, and, after three hours we got the mouth of the saston River. The River, Look Like the one in the jungle, crowded with green shrub on the sides. It is about 100 yards wide, and the current was slow. Three canoes were Fishing around, and one of them, was crowded with many turtles of different sizes, up to about 3 foot in diameter. On one side, we contemplate a variety of birds species, and animals. One is the "Iguana": they rested on the branch or the trees, and seemed to be caching the sun rays. Those reptils, were of about 5 feet, and look Like small alagators. We also saw sneaks hanging on the trees. One of the big one was the Masacuata of about 20 feet long, and 8 inches diameter. . . .

A few weeks later, his mastery of the language began to improve. He is still having problems with spelling, and he is starting to write with long subjects, which he is punctuating incorrectly. He is writing about being in the ROTC.

. . . . One of the most important facts that I have to do as a cadet student, is to wear the uniform correctly. Shoes and brass should always be shined and in good repair. No items of military uniform should be worn mixed in with civilian clothes. This include the military field jacket, with or without distinctive insignia. When outdoors, the cap should be worn centered on the head with the welt approximately parrallel to the ground (not pushed to the back of the head). The outer coat, whether the uniform blouse or the overcoat, most be completely buttoned when worn. Hands has to be keep out of the trousers or overcoat pockets and the cadet in uniform should be alert to return the hand salute when the situation warrants. When in uniform the cadet is expected to present a well gloomed military apperance. Hair has to be neat and well trimmed face clean shaven, mustache trimmed buttons fastened and tie straight. The manner in which cadets should have worn their uniform, has been an indication and state of their training, dicipline, morale, pride, and self respect.

He has come a long way in a short time.

Non-writing is a technique of writing just as much as being able to write is a technique of writing. The non-writer points to experiences without creating them out of words; the non-writer is forced by his uncontrolled words to refer to and pass through enormous amounts of worldly material and ends up without expanding the reader's life experience at all because of his inability to use words to create individual and informative human experiences. Unlike the non-writer, the person who can write selects and creates unique experiences that the writer is able to use to expand the reader's participation and orientation in the world. In my class, the skills of creating experiences for the reader and of selecting subject matter for the reader are basic to the craft of writing.