

Writing Matters



Writing Anxiety

Imagine that you are asked to write for an audience that you know will make comments on your writing and critique every choice you make. While some anxiety can be a good thing, it is often intimidating to have looming over you the specter of being judged according to how well you write. Our students experience this anxiety often but especially when assigned formal writing projects that count for a majority of their grades. This anxiety can be rooted in several places: not fully understanding an assignment, not knowing the learning goals for an assignment, the discipline-specific language used in giving an assignment, and the steps needed to complete a writing project. The resulting piece of writing can often be stilted, difficult to read, or just plain incorrect. How can we help our students overcome this fear? How can we best show them the ways writers work within our fields? Recognizing and understanding the student as a *novice* is a good first step.

Understanding the Novice Writer

To better understand the position in which our students find themselves when they come into our classes, it may be helpful to consider an analogy of a child learning to play the piano. Playing the piano and writing are both learned skills, full of tricky passages, unfamiliar rules and a lingo unique to their fields.

The novice piano player would never be expected to produce Beethoven (or even “Chopsticks”) at first. Instead, her teacher introduces her to scales, finger placement, the use of the pedals, etc. None of these tasks are, in themselves, “performance worthy,” but they are crucial first steps to a

good performance. This young piano player is spending time practicing the building blocks that make up all the great piano pieces.

As our young piano player develops, it is crucial that she has a “safe” place to practice that includes quality feedback that she understands. Anxiety creeps in when she feels that every slip up and every mistake are being harshly judged as though she were performing a recital. The piano player may also develop fear in the feedback process. If the piano teacher is not able to communicate in a way the student understands, the student

may not be able to incorporate the changes she needs in order to improve her playing.

On a related note, the piano student needs to practice – continually. She will never learn to play if she sits on the piano bench for thirty minutes merely listening to the teacher tell her how to play Beethoven. The student must jump in and try to play for herself in order to fully learn the intricacies of the piece.

As the student begins to explore a new piece of music, early attempts will sound nothing like what the piece is intended to be. There will be fits and starts, fingering mistakes,

wrong chords, and incorrect phrasing. However, given the all important gifts of time and quality, understandable feedback, she begins to iron out the difficulties. Her skills are growing with each attempt.

Finally, when in a recital and performance counts, the player’s practice has served her well. With a history of practice and quality feedback, she can be less afraid of the performance as she utilizes the skills she has become familiar with over time. She plays beautifully only because she understands the component parts of the piece.

Our various classes and disciplines are much like individual composers or

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The tough problem [in teaching] is not in identifying winners: it is in making winners out of ordinary people. —K. Patricia Cross

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The Novice Writer

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styles of music. Our students must learn again and again the particulars of each style. We can help our students navigate these new styles by understanding their apprehension. It is also imperative to realize that many students are novices in four or five class at once. They are learning the rules and conventions of sometimes vastly different styles of writing.

Writing anxiety is a fact of life for most of our students. However, our understanding approach to writing within our classrooms and within specific writing assignments can help alleviate that fear and give our students the skills needed to succeed.



INTRODUCING

THE THIRD ANNUAL WAC ESSAY AWARDS

Students can enter any essay that they have written for a class during this academic year (Fall 2010-Spring 2011) in one of two categories: Research Essays and Non-research Essays. Cash prizes for first, second and third places in each category!

Deadline for entries: Thursday, March 31 at 4 pm

Entry forms and complete rules are available outside Oaks 101B and on
www.southwesterncc.edu/wac

We are what we repeatedly do. Excellence, then, is not an act but a habit.

- Aristotle