

# Teacher to Teacher

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## Beginnings Writers on Writing

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To find out how adult student authors who have been published in the *Beginnings* book approach the writing process, the OLRC conducted interviews with *Beginnings* authors. We want to thank the following students for sharing their ideas with us and with you: Fumiko Adair, Art Massengill, Ida Osborn, Carol Rudder, and Dale Sherman. Their comments about working through each step of the writing process are presented below along with tips that teachers can use to help all writers.



### Choosing a Topic

*What writers say:* Many of the authors we interviewed said they are most comfortable using everyday experiences and things that are familiar to them.

- When it comes to picking a topic, I draw on my life experiences. Sometimes looking at pictures will give me ideas on a topic. However, most of the time I must sit down and try to recall what I have done, where I have been, and what I have seen.
- To get started—usually something happens to make me remember something from my past.
- Experiences in life...growing up, etc.
- Good topic advice? Something interesting I see. A walk through the park...simple things that some wouldn't even think about.
- I am learning to pick one part of a memory and then try to make it as clear as possible. I have so many stories to tell it is hard to choose sometimes.

Some of the authors choose topics that will touch people's emotions:

- If it has a clear message, something to touch your (reader's) heart, if it is easy to sympathize in your situation, this topic would be fine.
- How do you know when a topic is good? Touches people's emotions. Causes people to respond or react to it.
- There are so many things to choose from, but I pick something I enthusiastically care for.

And a few authors said that ideas just pop into their heads:

- During childhood ideas woke me up in the night.
- It's so simple – something comes to my mind. Many times I wake up in the night with a thought. Continues to wake me up.

*What teachers can do:*

- Allow students to develop their own topics as often as possible. We think it's important to note that these authors wrote about their own topics, not something their teachers or tutors assigned. You may want to evaluate your in-class writing instruction. How often do you encourage students to write on their own topics and for their own reasons?
- Encourage class discussions on a variety of issues.

When a particularly interesting topic arises in discussion, take advantage of the opportunity to encourage writing: "That would be a great topic for a piece of writing!"

- If students have trouble coming up with a topic, lead a brainstorm session, use pictures or photographs as prompts, discuss local issues, or read a short story or a chapter from a book. (See <http://literacy.kent.edu/Oasis/Resc/Trade/index.html> for book suggestions.) You may want to encourage students to keep lists of good topics for writing.

### Writing a Draft

*What writers say:* Most of the authors described writing a draft as a process, something that evolves over time, often with input from other students or the teacher.

- It's a mess. Reread, rewrite 2-3 times. See how it sounds. Eliminate a lot. Put something down. Work till I feel it's done. Then bring it to school.
- I just start to write and sort my ideas. Sometimes I list my favorite phrases or particular words from books I read because I don't have much vocabulary as an ESOL student. Then I brainstorm, to find out what kind of information I need to further research including forms of writing, such as which form is most suitable to send my message.
- I read it over several times to be sure it is saying what I want it to say and then I show it to others and get their input.
- Write an outline. Put thoughts in sentences and paragraph form. Proofread and make changes as needed. I ask myself, Does it fit its purpose? Is it to the point? Does it flow smoothly? Does it hold your interest from beginning to end?
- Our teacher always tells us that she wants to see it – to make a picture in her mind. We all try to do that with our writing. We make pictures with our words.

*What teachers can do:*

- Make sure students understand that a good piece of writing will go through more than one draft.
- Give students the opportunity to write often and to practice different genres of writing. Demonstrate different

ways of generating ideas, such as webbing or brainstorming or making lists. Encourage students to practice these and to select ones for independent use that seem to work well for them.

- Have each student choose one or two things they would like to improve each time they write rather than having them try to work on several things at once. It may be helpful to link reading and writing here. For example, you might ask students to keep track of particularly powerful sentences or effective beginnings or excellent descriptions of places or people from their reading. These can be used as the basis of a discussion of the writer's craft.

### Getting Feedback

*What writers say:* Some writers like feedback that is very specific. They feel that this feedback from other students and from the teacher is important in improving their writing. The authors say they want both positive and negative comments about their writing.

- Some feedback I receive is: Can it be written in a better way? We might then decide something might be better written a different way. Other class members may offer a suggestion. All is helpful, but the opinions of others are best.
- Correction of my errors is mostly what I need. In the past, I shared particular parts with my friends to confirm my writing is accurate because I sometimes missed or misunderstood especially oral information.
- The most helpful feedback is critical. I need something to challenge me for further brainstorm. I also need a clear pointing to my English mistakes such as grammar, suitable words, etc.

Other writers like to get more general feedback about their writing.

- The most helpful feedback makes your writing better and makes you think about your writing.
- Hopefully you get some positive and some negative so you can learn from it and make your piece better. With both positive and negative feedback it is important to know why they feel the need for the change in the piece before you make a change.
- I get good feedback from my class and teachers. We talk about each other's writing projects during group and help each other to know what is good and what needs to be made better. I think it is important [to get feedback] from several different people. What one misses, another will probably find. Different people are going to be reading my writing and I want as many different kinds of feedback as I can get to hopefully make my writing as clear as possible.

And some of the writers talked about the kind of feedback that gives them the confidence to keep on writing.

- When people comment about what I wrote – makes me feel great that I've been able to be a writer "raised on a farm in Tennessee. County closed school...couldn't go to school. 16 years old in second grade"
- When I showed my final piece that was submitted to [*Beginnings*], some people asked me to keep it for themselves. That was the best response to give me confidence.

*What teachers can do:*

- Encourage students to critique and edit each other's work.
- Have the class develop a rubric to help them evaluate and improve their writing.
- Engage students in a discussion about positive ways to offer feedback. Encourage them to ask questions about areas of writing that need to be revised rather than criticizing.

### Making Revisions

*What writers say:* All of the authors interviewed talked about their approach to making revisions based on the feedback they received.

- I use the computer to print out from beginning of rough drafts. Without the computer at school, it is impossible to work effectively.
- I go over it with my tutor and look for ways to improve the piece. We start by reading it out loud, stopping when it does not make sense. If a word is spelled wrong, I correct it. If it does not flow smoothly, I rewrite it. [I] edit and change words that might not fit just right, proofread and correct spelling and punctuation errors. Let someone check it for you.
- If there are any changes to make, I will rewrite it making the changes. Then it is complete.
- I read it over and then ask others to check it over for me. I sometimes have a tendency to get off track in my writing by trying to bring in too many details.

*What teachers can do:*

- If possible, have the students use computers to make this process easier. Teach them to number their drafts to keep track of changes. Teach them to use grammar and spell checkers.
- Help students understand that spell-check is not a substitute for proofreading. For example, spell-check doesn't know that *form the store* is supposed to be *from the store*.

Perhaps the most important thing a teacher can do is to encourage their student writers every step of the way. Publishing their work is another way teachers can support their writers. While publishing for a broad audience may not always be possible, students can create classroom newsletters, books, or writing corners where they can display their favorite pieces.

### Sites About the Writing Process

[http://www.arcanum-butler.k12.oh.us/writing\\_process.html](http://www.arcanum-butler.k12.oh.us/writing_process.html)

In addition to descriptions of the writing process, this site also contains information about the importance of voice.

[http://www.psesd.wednet.edu/write\\_process/Write\\_PC/writepr.htm](http://www.psesd.wednet.edu/write_process/Write_PC/writepr.htm)

The Writing Process Website contains descriptions of each step plus links to 6+1 Trait Writing.

<http://www.nwrel.org/assessment/department.asp?d=1>

Information about 6+1 Trait Writing from the North West Regional Education Laboratory.

<http://literacy.kent.edu/eureka/strategies/writing.html>

This site has several writing strategies to help students "stretch" their writing.