

Process: More Than A Fad For The Business Writer

Paula J. Pomeranke

Illinois State University

PROCESS? PRODUCT? MORE FADS! More jargon! Well, as a secondary English teacher I had weathered the fads—modules, letting the students choose their courses so they would enjoy them, omitting grammar completely, and many, many more. When I began as a graduate assistant in the English Department at Illinois State in 1982, I was told that the freshman composition classes were to be taught using the process approach. However, I figured I would do as I had always done and just use whatever method that worked best for me. But, to my surprise, I have become an advocate of the process approach and incorporate it in all my classes, composition and business writing.

There isn't much in print yet about the process method in business writing. Up to now, Selzer's article, "The Composing Processes of an Engineer," has been a major one out of the very few studies of how a professional writer works. However, Odell and Goswami's new book *Writing in Nonacademic Settings* promises the latest information on the processes of professional writers. In addition, some of the new texts are including sections on process or are even organized according to the process method, as Davis's *Better Business Writing: A Process Approach*.

I constantly choose what aspects of the process approach work best for my students. My goal is for them to understand that the writing process is recursive and to examine how they each write in order to improve their papers. Therefore, I begin with the techniques on the first assignment and repeat them for each succeeding assignment during the semester.

First, I have the students examine the audience of each writing they do. We spend at least one class period for the first assignment examining all the aspects of the audience the student must consider before writing—age, sex, beliefs, attitudes, education level, among others. We discuss these before the students ever begin a draft.

Then we talk about some invention heuristics that they might want to use when thinking of what to write. I don't spend as much time as I might in a composition class; however, business students need some help even if they choose the basic journalism heuristic—who, what, when, where, why, and how. Although some call this step "prewriting" or "predrafting," I think it is more important for students to realize that they will keep coming back to this initial information as they rewrite the drafts that follow. I don't want them to think that process means just three clear-cut consecutive steps.

Then they are ready to write a first draft. When the students bring this draft to class, I explain that although most of them normally would have

turned in that draft as the final product, I will not take it because now the real writing occurs. We spend several class periods evaluating drafts, both in groups and pairs, and individually in conference. Before any editing, "rewriting," "revising," or "postdrafting," however, we discuss what they are to look for in each other's drafts. The one dictate is that they are not to pay any attention to mechanical errors or spelling! For most students that's the easy way out—some of them have done a lot of proofreading for surface errors in the past. However, we choose areas for evaluation of the drafts. On the first draft, for example, they may look for audience perception, clarity of thought, and organization.

They continue by examining the second draft for audience perception and organization. In addition, they look for any confusing sentences, vocabulary, and paragraphs. We discuss why the vocabulary must be chosen so carefully for the audience. We also discuss adding and subtracting information, depending on the audience's needs. We talk about the sentences in a paragraph being out of order and do some exercises together to get a feel for reorganization. Depending on the group, I may have them work with the same groups or pairs or change partners. I have no firm rules to follow.

On the third draft, then, the students read for mechanical errors. Why wait until the third draft to consider spelling and mechanics? Well, if students are involved with looking for them on the first draft, then they will never rewrite. However, when they rewrite, they change sentences and punctuation, and probably work out the errors as they simplify and condense their writing.

Once students learn to approach each assignment this way, they become much better writers. They can write clearer, more concise memos, reports, or letters following these steps. Their collaboration is more meaningful. Learning how to approach any writing task they might have should remove the apprehension many writers face. They also become better readers. How many people in business who find that reading is a major part of their job are trained to be readers?

Recently I developed a writing training program for a financial institution and used the process approach for it. When I discussed my plan with the training director, she was astounded by my description of writing as recursive. After we discussed her writing process, she finally admitted that she wasted time when she was writing. When she would get into the middle of a draft, she just didn't know where to go from there and ended up doodling all over her page and feeling *very* frustrated.

She was fascinated as I explained that her problem might stem from the fact that she didn't think through what she needed to do before she began to write and consequently felt frustrated because her first draft was not

sufficient. I also explained to her that since she didn't think about what she needed to write and for whom before she began, then she had nothing to judge her draft by. How could she revise anything except punctuation and spelling when she really didn't understand what she needed in the first place?

I reminded her that professional writing has an audience with specific needs. No longer is the writing done for a teacher who grades and returns the paper so students can file it in some manner. Business is transacted by this writing and, therefore, it takes on an importance that school papers never had.

I think the process approach makes much more sense for business writing than any other approach. Because students learn *how* to face their writing tasks and how to evaluate the writing itself, hopefully they will be more relaxed when writing.

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Dr. David N. Bateman
Department of Management
Southern Illinois University at Carbondale
Carbondale, IL 62901

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