



An example of a good writing lesson

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shows how to turn ideas into paragraphs.

It is not difficult to teach a good writing lesson, but before you go into the classroom to teach one, it's worth considering what we mean by the expression 'writing lesson'. For some, a writing lesson is a quiet lesson in which the students spend the duration pushing their pencils across the page, forcing out three hundred words in something approximating an essay or an article. But is that a writing lesson – or a writing test masquerading as a lesson?

So, what is a writing lesson?

A writing lesson is one in which the target output will be written. But it is for us to decide how much of the lesson is spent on the mechanics of writing, and how large that target needs to be.

Looking back at my own writing lessons, those that I felt were the most successful generally aimed

to have students producing work of between a sentence and a paragraph in length – anything longer than that means I was beginning to stray away from the idea of a writing lesson and back into test territory.

It's not uncommon for students to come to my classes with little knowledge of what writing is (and what it isn't), and so I find it helps to begin at the beginning, and to take a process-oriented approach, building from what my students know how to do (which is speaking), and showing them how to take that and turn it into a good piece of writing.

Process writing, building from speaking

Starting with speaking is a good way to bring energy to your writing lesson. If you do this, however, you must make sure that if your students learn nothing

else (and this is quite possible), they must learn that **writing is not speaking written down**. You can draw your students' attention to this by working with them to produce a good written sentence.

In my example lesson, I asked my students to talk together about the classroom we were working in. I wanted them to think about the shape of the room, something they liked about the room and something they disliked about it. We wouldn't use all of this information at once, but since it sometimes helps to think of the bad in order to reveal the good, I thought it was worth doing (I also saw how they rolled their eyes when I said, 'Think about something about the room that you like'.) This, of course, leads very naturally into writing a report for the Cambridge C1 Advanced exam; but that was something we only considered very briefly. I wanted to get a couple of good sentences out of my students, no more than that.

The students talked. They said things like:

'I like the way the room is arranged. We don't sit in rows like we do at school. Instead, we have desks in like a U-shape, and we sit so that we can all see the whiteboard and the teacher. You don't have to look at the back of the next student's head. And you have a lot of space in the middle of the room. That's useful too, because you can get up and move around for some activities.'

These are useful ideas, and as I took my students' feedback, I made a set of bullet points on the whiteboard to bring those ideas together. But as much as I liked the ideas, the way they were expressed left much to be desired (if they were written down as I've presented them here). I asked them to discuss this as well – would they expect to find the same ideas in a written text (yes!), and would they expect these ideas to be expressed in the same way in a written text (no!).

When we speak, we tend to split our message up into bitesize chunks. We usually find ourselves in dialogue with our audience, and splitting the message up like this makes sense: we can check understanding by looking and listening for the cues that tell us that our interlocutor is paying attention. But these cues disappear when we write, and with them so too does our need to keep things so easy for our interlocutor. Expectations change. Our speaking partner will want us to give them a chance to digest what they're hearing, and so we adjust the speed at which we speak. But if we wrote text that was as digressive and broken up, our reader would soon grow frustrated. It's better to write in longer sentences that have a higher density of information, and let our reader decide how quickly they want to work through it all.



Starting with speaking is a good way to bring energy to your writing lesson.

I drew my students' attention to the bullet points, and in pairs they discussed how they might put the information together. Perhaps it made sense to reorder the presentation of that information? Perhaps they could glue some of the sentences together?

They began to write, and I monitored closely, looking for good first drafts. One of these went onto the board:

The classroom is arranged in a different way to how it is at school. Instead of sitting in rows, the desks are in a kind of U-shape, so we can all see the teacher and the whiteboard and not just the backs of the other students' heads. There's also a lot of space in the middle of the room, which is useful because you can get up and move around for some activities.

Already this looks better – and the students reached this point fairly independently. In place of our original six sentences, we now have only three. The first is quite short, but as a topic sentence it works well, and

the other two are longer, multi-clause sentences that support their own weight. The three sentences are tied together with reasonably subtle cohesive devices: the second follows logically from the first as it explains the point made in the topic sentence and the third is tied to the second through the use of *also*.

But it could still be better

When we speak, we are intent on communicating our message – but once that message is out there, our chosen form of expression cannot be changed or altered in any way. We aren't *Men in Black* (1997), ready to shine a light at each other to blank our memories. Writing is different, though. Until we send out our message, we still have the power to go back and alter the forms of expression we have used. This is what we call 'editing'. I say this explicitly because if you ask your students what they think the word means, you'll likely find they've confused it



with 'correcting' – they'll only look for the mistakes they've made rather than for possible improvements in how the text is constructed.

I didn't expect my students to be accomplished editors already – this is an area where they need more guidance than almost any other that I can think of. But if they can't yet edit directly, they can at least sense where those edits need to come. There then followed another discussion between pairs (you'll notice there's an enormous amount of speaking going on in this writing lesson), the aim being to highlight areas of weakness in the text.

One suggestion was to find a way to combine the first two sentences. We liked the strength of that topic sentence but thought that the topic itself wasn't so profound that we needed to worry about making a dramatic entrance into our paragraph.

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The second suggestion was about looking for more sophisticated – or, to put it another way, more specifically, contextually *correct* – language to use in our descriptions.

This part of the activity will present the most challenge for the teacher, as they must take what the students are saying and help them to realise it all on the page – which requires the teacher to be a competent writer themselves. I've been a director of studies long enough to know that few teachers also happen to be effortlessly good writers – I usually demand wholesale rewrites of our midyear and end-of-year reports, to give one example – and so I do want to take this opportunity to exhort my readers to invest some time in developing their own writing skills. This is easy to do – simply put yourself in the place of your own student in a writing lesson, and attempt both sides of the activity. Getting a colleague involved along the way will help, just as it helps our students to have a partner to discuss things with.

After another few minutes of work, all done via a back-and-forth across the class, we came up with the following edited paragraph:

The classroom uses a horseshoe arrangement for the desks instead of having students sit in rows like in a typical state school. This offers two advantages, with the first being increased visibility of the whiteboard and the teacher, and the second being the space that has opened up in front of the desks, which is perfect for activities that require movement.

I was very pleased with this edited version. It is only two sentences long, and for the content that we're communicating, that feels appropriate. It is also about a dozen words shorter than the previous effort – and a full twenty words shorter than the spoken equivalent. This is what you'd expect – writing should take up less space than speaking. I was delighted at bringing the word count down (my students weren't; they're of the generation that routinely writes the author's name as John Ronald Reuel Tolkien because it counts as four words), because you don't have many words to play with in most formal exams, and you need to do as much as you can within such strict limits to get a high mark.

We had now worked our way through the process of writing a single paragraph of text. This had taken us about an hour. That might seem like a lot of time – especially when you consider we'd only produced sixty words. Students at this level would need to create texts four times as long, and in far less time!

But the idea is not to do this whole process every time they encounter a writing prompt. Instead, I want them to know how to approach the process



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The next stage – and in this case the final stage – of the lesson was to have the students think about the next paragraph. We'd discussed the advantages of the use of space in the classroom – but what about the problems we had in using this space? There was time for a fresh brainstorming activity – highlighting issues like the sunlight making it hard to see what was projected on the whiteboard, and the industrial-style strip lighting giving everyone a migraine – followed by the creation of a first draft. This was constructed with the students in pairs; the lesson was by then drawing to a close, the homework, naturally enough, was to attempt to edit what they'd produced so far.

And it was a success. Well, relatively speaking, they all did the homework.

Reference

Men in Black. (1997). Sonnenfeld, B. Sony Pictures.



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