

## Better Ways to the Teaching of Personal Writing

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The current situation regarding the teaching of personal writing in many secondary schools is that students are given a topic by the teacher (often one from a past examination paper) and told to write. The full process of writing (pre-writing, writing and post-writing activities) is rarely explained. Students are seldom given any stimulus in the form of models of good writing or material that could arouse their interest in the writing task. In a nutshell, students are expected to write well but are not given enough guidance or motivation to do so.

This research was undertaken in order to explore what methods can be used to improve the teaching of personal writing in secondary schools. The results obtained by reviewing articles on various methods indicate that there are many ways of teaching personal writing that can make students enjoy writing, want to write, find writing meaningful and lead to an improved quality in their writing. The methods reported on here challenge teachers to be innovative and creative.

### **Free Writing**

In this method, students are asked to write freely on a topic determined by the class or the teacher. Free writing "concentrates on content, not worrying about form, and writing without stopping" (Jacobs 1986:282). With the worry of making

errors removed (the work is not graded), students can focus entirely on getting their ideas on paper. Research shows that if free writing is carried out regularly, the quality of writing improves (Jacobs 1986:286). Since personal writing depends largely on students' imagination and creativity, free writing is a good platform that can be used to enthuse students to write.

### **Stimulated writing**

Stimuli in the form of music, pictures and film can motivate students to write. "Listening to music without lyrics allows students to use their imagination" claim Castillo and Hillman (1995:30) who carried out a study in Columbia. The teacher selects a piece of music, plays it to the students and asks them to write whatever feelings or thoughts the music arouses in them. A similar method can be used with pictures taken from magazines, newspapers, books etc. As a variation, Cuenca and Carmona (1986:41) asked students to draw pictures and then exchange them and write about each others' pictures. Finally the students were asked to explain their own pictures. This method not only encouraged writing, but also listening, speaking and reading.

Films can also be used to stimulate writing in schools where this is possible. In a study conducted by Fluitt-Dupuy, students were shown a film and asked to write what they thought about it. The study showed that

the students “not only constructed plots to aid comprehension but also collected useful vocabulary for their writing” (2001:15).

### **Using models**

Showing students models of good writing gives them an idea of what to aim for. Research undertaken by Sorensen (1991:3) and Baskoff (1981:2) shows that, when students are given model compositions, they learn how to prepare a more focussed and deeper response in writing.

In addition to the model, teachers can give students a writing strategy worksheet designed to guide students as they write. This requires a good deal of work on the teacher’s part but, once done, such worksheets and models can be re-used.

### **Creative Writing**

Personal writing includes not only narrative and descriptive writing, but also creative writing. Gaffield-Vile (1998:31) maintains that “creative writing is a journey of self-discovery, and self-discovery promotes effective learning”, and he concludes that when “students were taught to write other forms of text like haiku poems or short stories, their standard of writing improved considerably”.

### **Pen pal letters**

Some teachers may be able to organise pen pal exchanges for their students. According to Hennigan (1999:41), the more students exchange letters, the more their writing improves. Such a real life situation can motivate students as it is meaningful communication.

### **Journals**

Like free writing, journal writing is ungraded, allowing students to focus on expressing

their thoughts and feelings rather than on accuracy and structure. Kerka’s (1996) research indicated that journals serve as a source of ideas that students can later use in compositions and that “... as students begin to develop ideas recorded in their journals in compositions, they will begin to work on smoothing out grammatical problems”.

### **Writers’ workshops**

Writers’ workshops promote safe atmospheres for writing and let students know that their writing is important. The emphasis is on writing freely, creatively, and using the imagination and personal experiences. While organising such workshops is time-consuming, they are worthwhile.

### **Publication of students’ work**

Students’ work can be ‘published’ in the school magazine, in a newsletter, on the notice board. Having their work published is an incentive, and shows that the work is appreciated and valued. Talented artists can be asked to illustrate the work.

### **Process writing**

Many teachers pay little attention to the *process* of writing. The emphasis on the *product* ignores the fact that composing is a process of thinking, exploration and revision. In some types of writing assignments, however, teachers could treat their students’ writing as a first draft and encourage them to edit and revise, following the teacher’s text-specific suggestions regarding organisation, content and style. Peer editing can also be done. Once the students are satisfied they have revised their work as well as they are able, the work can be collected again for marking.

## Conclusion

These methods of teaching personal writing can be adapted and used for teaching other types of writing. They are good means of enthusing students to **want** to write. With a variety of methods and an enthusiastic teacher, children can become competent and creative members of a literate society.

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