

THE READING/WRITING *DIS*CONNECTION

Will writing instruction finally catch up with the changing styles of what our students are reading?

by Mark Diamond

Writing to Command Attention! Workshops

Maryanne slowly rose to her feet. After making eye contact with each of those assembled around the mahogany, coffin-shaped conference table, she uttered these astonishing and unforgettable words: "Whatever publishing company offers the tallest pile of crap gets the adoption."

As the vice president and publisher of one of the world's most prolific educational publishing companies, Maryanne (not her real name) knew *exactly* what school systems purchased: *quantity* of elements over *quality* of content - systems, programs, units and series with *multiple* pieces that would impress adopters with their sheer numbers, creating the illusion that they were getting added value for their dollars.

But if this approach actually worked, our public schools would be overflowing with exceptionally high-achieving writing students. Sadly, this is not the case. As teachers, we face a constant uphill battle – clawing our way past every single rung on the student achievement ladder. Struggling towards our goal, we are challenged at each step by a society that no longer places great value on education and educators, ever-increasing recreational student distractions, parents that are either absent or over-involved, administrators more interested in test scores than actual learning, and bureaucracies that seem to justify their existence by the amount of paperwork they can generate.

What They Read Is Not What They Write

The current reality is that what our students read, apart from their textbooks, is infinitely more commanding than what we teach them to write. And while professional writers are producing children's and young adult books of fiction and non-fiction which excite young minds by utilizing contemporary writing styles, school literacy texts are showcasing the same mind-numbing writing demos and overly complex strategies they've been using for the past two decades.

So the following questions spring to mind: What techniques do professional writers use to command the attention of their readers? Why don't textbook writers utilize and then teach these professional methods? How can writing instruction ever match the level of what our kids are reading?

Writing With Real World Value

As an educational writing consultant, educator trainer, published author and former public school creative writing teacher, I've seen school colleagues so overwhelmed by the myriad resources out there that they just throw in the towel, doing as little classroom writing as necessary to try and skate by.

I don't blame them, for had I not had the rare opportunity to create and develop new methods for narrative, persuasive and informational student writing – as a creative writing teacher at a Georgia Title 1 elementary school in the 90s – I would have done the same. Writing is just too difficult to have to suffer through complex instructional programs that confuse students and result in writing that has no authenticity or “real world value” whatsoever. To have real world value, the finished writing pieces would catch and command the attention of the reader throughout, while clearly, concisely and dynamically communicating pertinent ideas and information of intrinsic interest and value to the reader. This is what professional writers aspire to do, and so should our students.

So why do the vast majority of writing instruction methods result in writing that feels formulaic, dated, stodgy and obviously “student-y?” Perhaps it's due to the fact that most textbook writers are educators themselves, not professional writers of contemporary and popular styles, and as such have been surrounded by a persistent style of artificial writing that screams “THIS IS CLASSROOM WRITING.”

Innovation in bureaucracy is often an oxymoron, as many large public school systems and educational publishing companies seem invested in the continuation of obsolete methods. Sometimes, only a radical shakeup of curriculum elements can bring the changes necessary for instructional real world value.

The Narrative Writing/Reading Disconnect

During a recent workshop presentation with a group of elementary and middle school educators, a young fifth grade teacher enthusiastically posed this dilemma. "Mr. D, although your methods make so much sense, they conflict with the information in our brand new literacy textbooks. I'm not sure what to do."

It was certainly a reasonable concern. So we decided to delve into her district's new adoption and try to find a specific writing strategy to contrast with the methods I had just introduced. This example epitomizes the disconnect between what our students are reading and what they are being taught to write.

The teacher leafed through her textbook and found a chapter on titles for narrative writing pieces. Taking a page out of the 1970s, her text instructed young writers to title their narratives with the subject of the piece. *My Friend Buddy* was the title of their writing demo about a boy's friend named, guess who?

Instead of accepting those instructions for titling a narrative work, we brainstormed for titles that would be more dynamic, serving as a hook to catch the attention of the reader. "My Best Friend," said one. "Me and My Buddy," said another. "My Nutty Buddy," offered a third.

Another hand shot up and a fourth teacher blurted out his revelation. "I've got it!" he screamed in his enthusiasm. "The Boy Who Hated Ice Cream." It was as if he had found the cure for the common cold, and the room chorused, "That's it!" "Excellent!" and "Perfect!"

A quick glance at best-selling chapter books for young adults reveals a host of titles that support this approach. They beg the question, "What is this book about?" Certainly a worthy objective for any title. *Holes*. *Flush*. *Wrinker*. *So B. It*. *Crossing The Wire*. *6th Grade Glommers*, *Norks and Me*. But our texts are still teaching writing as if boring young minds is the ultimate objective. *My Friend Buddy*. *The Day I Fell Off My Bike*. *The Cat Who Got Run Over*.

"So do we all agree that *The Boy Who Hated Ice Cream* is a more interesting and attention-getting title than *My Friend Buddy*?" I asked. It was unanimous that this title pushed the reader to wonder what is wrong with this boy. "How could any boy or girl hate ice cream?" muses a typical reader, who then dives into the narrative trying to understand this unusual and intriguing character.

Although most probably not on a conscious level, the reader is also impressed with the author's skill in choosing this title, and is further motivated to become engaged in a potentially more satisfying reading experience.

Effective titles only hint, but do not tell the subject of the piece. They are often short, and sometimes alliterative. *Mountains and Mosquitoes* for a narrative about a mountain camping trip. Frequently they use a word or phrase from the narrative, and never should be considered or composed until *after* the narrative is complete. Mostly, a great title makes the reader question what this piece is about, commanding us to read on for answers.

The Informational Reading/Writing Disconnect

For decades, student reports have been the dullest and most tedious of writing genres. Deadly for teachers having to read them. Deadly for students having to write them. Deadly for parents having to oversee them. No wonder kids resist this genre most of all. For as writing instructors, we have been saddled with teaching the lackluster and outdated non-fiction methods that the big educational publishers have been pushing upon us, even though this genre changed dramatically in 1994. That was the year that *The Hot Zone: A Terrifying True Story* became a runaway bestseller.

An electrifying, factual account of the deadly Ebola virus outbreak in a suburban Washington, D.C. laboratory, author Richard Preston uses a host of narrative elements to bring the study of this medical phenomenon to life in a way that very few non-fiction writers had ever done before. And readers responded, as *The Hot Zone* went on to become a number one *New York Times* bestseller, proving that non-fiction writing does not have to be a forlorn step-child to the novel.

Here again, in informational writing, titles are important. Recently, I came upon this report title in an online journal of psychology: *Instant Gratification Takes Too Long*. In these five cleverly composed words, therapy author Sonia Neale was able to command my attention when confronted with the titles of 37 other dry-sounding online journal articles. She could have called it *An Examination of Impulse Control*, *Impulse Control and ADD*, or *Emotional Intelligence and Impulse Control*, but would any of these alternate titles for the same article have commanded your attention as well?

Leading sentences and opening paragraphs are the next elements for compelling the reader's attention. Here are two examples from student reports on Civil War heroine Harriet Tubman. The first is fairly typical of standard student writing that echoes traditional, if outmoded writing instruction methods. The second paragraph illustrates a method I've constructed by *deconstructing* contemporary non-fiction writing methods of successful and well-reviewed published authors.

Traditional Informational Writing Method:

Harriet Tubman was born into slavery as Araminta Ross in Maryland around 1822. In 1849, she escaped to Philadelphia, and then returned to Maryland to begin rescuing her family. She used safe houses known as the Underground Railroad, bringing dozens of other slaves to freedom.

Writing to Command Attention! Informational Writing Method:

Leaves crunched and curious whispers filled the night. A steady trickle of slaves stepped from the protective cover of the trees. They threw their hands up because they were finally free. One woman stayed in the shadows. This was Harriet Tubman, born as Araminta Ross, and she had brought them to freedom. No doubt, this scene had played out countless times during the lifetime of one of America's real-life superheroes.

above paragraph contributed by a student in Beth Richardson's 6th grade at Georgia's Forsyth County's Otwell Middle School

Without exception, readers comparing the above two opening paragraphs strongly prefer the latter example. It is dynamic and contains an immediately engaging narrative hook. Even if the remainder of the report proffers facts of Harriet Tubman's life in a more traditional manner, the commanding nature of the opening convinces the reader that this author cares deeply about providing a stimulating and entertaining reading experience.

By clinging to tired techniques of writing instruction, educators are creating more and more distance between the contemporary pieces our students are reading, and the writings they are producing. Is it little wonder that our students have no confidence in their writing abilities? *They* realize that their writings don't sound like the books or articles they actually enjoy reading, and

this discouragement leads to feelings of inadequacy and lack of motivation for writing projects.

But when students reread commanding paragraphs they have written, such as the second example above, they are filled with the satisfaction of effective and engaging communication. Suddenly, with seemingly little effort, they feel a camaraderie with the professional authors they have appreciated over the years. Now, they feel like *real* writers, not just *student* writers.

Beyond 2010, it is imperative that student writing echo the best of what they are reading. To this end, teachers of reading, as well as writing, will need to focus on these tenets of authentic written expression:

- Repeatedly point out elements of commanding writing as you encounter them with your class. This can occur in the classroom when you or your students are reading aloud from either professionally published works, or from your own writings.
- Resist using demo writings from reading or writing texts that sound inauthentic, have no “real world value” and which may seem formulaic, dated, stodgy and obviously “student-y.” Instead, compose and read your own writing demos.
- Create your own classroom writing prompts. Textbooks have no idea what is going on in your classroom, school or community, and often have little connection with your students. Only you can decide what writing topics may be of interest to your particular students. Nothing kills writing motivation like assigning topics of limited interest.
- Less Is More. Choose simple writing instruction techniques that will not overwhelm you and your students. Remember that organization is the key to coherent and dynamic writing. Programs that stress too many writing elements often accomplish nothing more than reinforcing common student beliefs that writing is just too difficult for them.
- Know that anyone can write and that it does not take years to develop a competent writer – just a few months using the right type of focused instruction for your students.

You, as the classroom teacher, are the key in matching available resources to the specific needs of your students. Your school district cannot possibly know your individual students better than you, and as such cannot effectively script your instruction. Embrace the responsibility you have been given. Consider all the resources you can compile and choose those that you believe will be easiest to both teach and learn while resulting in the most effective writing pieces. Then, revel in the joy your students will feel when their writing starts to sound more like the published books, articles, reports and stories they find compelling and entertaining.