

THE JOURNAL GAME

By Carolyn L. Bell

Writing teachers love to assign journals. A journal is a diary or record of thoughts and ideas. It's an easy trick to keep students writing, keep mental gears oiled. However, there are several precautions I feel the teacher must take when asking the student to write in a journal. These are:

1. Consider the ability of the student.
2. Make the journal relevant.
3. Respect the student's privacy.
4. Provide alternatives.
5. Praise the journal-keeper.

The first precaution recognizes the ability of the student writer. Don't expect a student who is otherwise incapable of arranging words into sentences to suddenly become a prolific author. Journal keeping is a process and, like most things in writing, takes time to develop. The first entry might be just a word or a sentence. A gradual increase in amount of writing will evolve naturally as the student writes.

The second precaution acknowledges the need to make the journal relevant to the student's life. Although it is often good to let the student wander freely amongst his thoughts, a teacher should have a ready supply of topics that relate to the student's dreams, goals or observations. These might range from "What I Hate About Writing" to "The Party Last Weekend." A favorite topic in Minnesota is weather. Asking the student to describe a favorite person such as a girlfriend or parent works well. An ongoing theme might be "Goals for the Year." Entries then relate to obstacles and aids to achieving the goal. It's surprising how much high school kids can write about saving for a car or losing weight.

The possibility of having the journal read can be a real threat to the student's need for privacy,* thus it's important to establish a mutually-agreeable reading policy with each student.

Reading policies might well range from the teacher not reading the journal at all to reading everything the student has written. "Secret" sections can be marked off with paper clips or rubber bands. The aim, after all, of assigning journals is to allow the student to express any of his or her thoughts on paper, not to pry into the student's private life. Depending on the student's feelings regarding reading work aloud, good journal entries can be read by student or teacher as examples of competent spontaneous writing. If the teacher keeps a journal right along with the students, and reads passages aloud from time to time, the students may share their own journals more openly.

The fourth precaution in assigning a journal is to provide alternatives for those students who resist the journal. Many teenagers have strong objections to enforced regime. Their resistance to journals, if not respected, may transfer to a negative attitude toward writing in general. The journal is one of many forms of writing and should be treated as a writing exercise. The teacher should be willing to offer alternative "loosening" exercises for those students to whom a journal is repugnant. Let them copy quotes or passages from their favorite writings. Engage them in word games, such as picking five to ten unfamiliar words from a dictionary and constructing nonsense sentences with them. Allow them to play with language by freely associating words with specific colors, sounds and sensations. Bring in records, sandpaper, and photographs to use as background or inspiration.

The last precaution in assigning journals is to give students lots of praise. Let them know out loud and in writing that you appreciate their efforts. It is an effort to write, especially every day.

Have individual conferences with each writer to discuss the journal. Keep remarks positive and direct. Open-ended suggestions such as "you seem to know this person you're describing well. It makes me want to know more about him," are more fruitful than, "This is vague." If the student's writing is full of misspelled

words and incomplete thoughts, make mental notes and incorporate his or her particular needs into classwork.

For those students whose journals are private, the teacher should acknowledge the student's continuing efforts, and encourage the student to submit some writing open for the teacher's perusal.

Avoid marking journals with hieroglyphics. Basic to journal-writing is a student's trust. Journals ought to be a place where the writing student can write freely. Never ditto an excerpt from a journal in your enthusiasm for its success unless you've first received the writer's permission. If you adhere to these five precautions, your students should reward you with fine examples of writing in their journals.

In short, use the journal as an educational game, but keep its fun intact.

CALL FOR PAPERS

Minnesota English Journal issues a call for papers for the Winter/Spring issue. The theme: The Troubled, The Gifted, The Disabled. Deadline for submissions, January 15, 1981. Classroom teachers are especially requested to inquire about submissions and to submit materials other teachers might find helpful. Send inquiries or articles to:

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