

ADAPT

A Process for Developing Writing Activities for Content Area Classes

by
Greta Michaels

Teachers are inveterate borrowers. We all pick up ideas, activities, exercises, and texts which we encounter elsewhere and adapt for our own classrooms. ADAPT is the name of the process which we who work with Writing in Content Areas, an innovative, cost-effective project first funded by the Minnesota Council on Quality Education and now funded by ISD 625, St. Paul, recommend to content area teachers who ask us for help. For it is, after all, to English teachers that administrators and content area teachers look for help when they anticipate writing in content areas. Such writing may be both writing to learn and writing to communicate what has been learned.

Our acronym ADAPT both names and describes the process which we suggest:

- Assess your students
- Delve into your subject
- Articulate your objectives
- Ponder the possibilities
- Turn one into an assignment.

The acronym also serves as a useful framework for a description of just what we do when we help content area teachers develop writing activities for their classes. The discussion is followed by an example of writing activities "adapted" for junior high school students.

ASSESS YOUR STUDENTS

Every writing activity should be situation specific, tailored to the needs and abilities of the students who will be writing. How these students think is our first concern.

An equally crucial question is how do these students write? Chittenden, an experienced teacher with the Bay Area Project, places student writing behaviors on a continuum of fluency-coherence-correctness. The student who is struggling to attain fluency has trouble getting anything down on paper. This student needs practice writing "I learned" statements, responses, restatements of subject material. The student who has attained fluency needs next to work on coherence. Is his/her writing logical? rational? understandable? This student needs to develop a sense of audience and purpose through sharing writing with others. In a content area class such sharing serves another purpose as well—it is yet another way to run the subject material by the students who are learning it. When students are sharing their writing, they begin to

worry about correctness. At the level of correctness a student writes fluently, coherently, and correctly most of the time. This student, however, needs much writing practice, particularly using higher order thinking skills. (10-19)

A word about correctness is appropriate. We do not recommend that teachers ignore error; we are mindful that too much emphasis on errors can bring on writer's block, and we recommend that teachers focus on just one type of error at a time, a type which students have been taught to correct. Many content area teachers, are first concerned that students learn to spell terms correctly. Of course, a ground rule for all writing in content areas is that the content communicated be factually correct!

DELVE INTO YOUR SUBJECT

A further consideration when developing writing activities is what the specific subject area requires. Each content area makes special demands: in math, teachers are concerned with process and problem solving; in science, the concept load is heavy and students must learn to complete lab procedures; in social studies, students must learn to find what is significant in a mass of facts; in home economics and industrial arts, students must learn to read, follow, and give directions to complete a project; in health, the factual information must be related to the individual student's life.

The kind of thinking which a subject and a proposed writing activity will require is, then, a special concern. We agree with Glatthorn that good writing requires good thinking, but no one knows just how the two are connected (70). It is our belief that thinking and writing and subject material can, and must be, taught together. As we "adapt" and develop writing activities, we must consider which thinking skills need to be encouraged and build practice of those skills into the activity.

ARTICULATE YOUR OBJECTIVES

Practice of the thinking skill we have thus identified is certainly one possible objective for a writing activity. Usually teachers have additional objectives for using writing such as providing writing practice, rehearsing a process which has been explained, or repeating content material.

Teaching the conventions of standard written English is not usually a primary objective for the content area teacher as it is for the English teacher. He or she does, however, have to teach students writing and thinking strategies such as the REAP reading procedure for making notes, the use of ladder notes for comparisons, or RECAP for writing summaries of a lab activity.

Hillocks identifies successful writing teachers as "environmental" teachers, teachers who develop activities which involve students in processes of basic inquiry crucial to prewriting, writing, and editing. He identifies observation, description, and comparison/contrast as strategies which lead to generalizations which enumerate and hypothesize. Such teachers turn possible writing assignments into activities which give students experience in these basic strategies of inquiry (667-673). Certainly, if we define

"writing" as composing, as asking and answering questions, as solving problems, we will make provision of such experience one of our objectives for using a writing activity (667-673).

PONDER THE POSSIBILITIES

In Writing in Content Areas, we distinguish between "formal" and "informal" writings: formal activities are those writings which students revise and which we teachers grade; informal writing activities are short, subject-centered, and responded to, but not graded, by the teacher. Informal writing activities are less intimidating for students struggling to attain fluency and coherence; since they do not require large blocs of time, such short, focused writing are useful for content area teachers who have long agendas of material to be taught. These writings can take the place of worksheets or the questions at the end of the chapter which merely require copying answers from the book; we are always concerned to get students to process the material they are learning and to write in their own words.

Another thing to consider when developing a writing activity is the variety of writings which students regularly do in a given class. Science classes may focus on making notes and writing lab reports while social studies classes require summaries or math classes demand explanations of problem solving procedures. We recommend that teachers try several writing strategies and/or modes and then use interchangeably the few which seem to work best for them, their subject material, and their students.

A given writing assignment can be presented either as a prompt for writing done in notebooks (or on pages handed in) or as a supplement to a worksheet on which questions focus the students' thoughts (as do prewriting activities) before asking them to complete a writing. We call the many common forms or modes of writing which can be so adapted and presented to students "generic" forms of writing. An example of such a form is the "name" poem described by Gere. The familiar acrostic poem which students usually write about themselves or some person they know becomes a way of getting students to summarize what they know about a scientific object, historical figure, food etc.

A useful model which relates thinking to forms of writing which they do is Bazerman's consideration of student writing as "on-going written conversation." Since this model focuses on the relationship between the reading students do and their writing, it is particularly useful for content area teachers. Bazerman sees students reading and then writing in several stages or levels. The first is accurate understanding of prior comments. This involves students in writings like paraphrases or summaries, the kinds of writings our students regularly do in learning logs and class notebooks. The second level is reacting to reading. Here students are writing responses, including their own views with their restatements of the contents of a text. Our students do this when they write side by side notes, responses in their reading journals, and informal reaction essays. Bazerman's final stage is evaluating the reading done, defining issues and developing informed views. Here, of course, students are engaging in critical thinking

at the highest levels of Bloom's Taxonomy, analysis, synthesis, and evaluation. Students who are writing coherently and correctly do this when they develop formal writings, particularly writings based on research (656-661).

TURN ONE INTO AN ASSIGNMENT

As English teachers we are all aware of the three things every writer needs to know—audience, purpose for writing, and mode—and we build these into every assignment. To these Shifsky and Huffman make a vital addition: a route through the assignment. If students are to complete a writing successfully, especially if they are inexperienced writers, it is vital that they know how to move through a writing. Sometimes the route through the assignment is part of the inquiry strategy or the writing/thinking strategy we are teaching; on other occasions, it may be as simple as a set of directions.

A second element which we like to add to content area writing activities is criteria for evaluation. White demonstrates convincingly the value of criteria for evaluation as a teaching tool. If we engage students in a discussion of what a given writing should include and how the writing should be graded, they will be aware of what a given writing needs. The teacher also will have a set of criteria on which to base a guide for primary trait-holistic scoring, a quick and effective response to sets of informal writings.

To illustrate how ADAPT works, let's imagine that we are English teachers who have been asked to help a seventh grade American History teacher develop a writing activity for a class learning about Roger Williams. A text book section entitled "Historymaker" about Roger Williams has been read and discussed in class; following the discussion students wrote "I learned" statements, some of which demonstrate that students missed the crucial ideas in the reading.

This class is not ability grouped. Most of the students are concrete in their thinking; a few write coherently, but many are still struggling to attain fluency. They all need writing practice with material with which they have some familiarity. All are overwhelmed by the mass of information in their textbook. The teacher is particularly concerned that these students understand the concept of religious freedom and tolerance for differing beliefs. She also wants to make clear to the students the important role which individuals with the courage of their convictions have played in our history. Previous experience has shown that assignments must be constructed so that they require recasting, putting the information into new structures, as well as restating of facts and ideas; the assignment must be such that the students will have to write in their own words instead of copying from the textbook as they are wont to do. These students have done both oral and written role playing in class. They are also familiar with diary entries and letters as modes for writing. Since this writing will be shared in class and then published by posting in the hallway, it is presented as a prompt for writing to be done on separate pages.

Here's the writing activity as "adapted."

Imagine that you are the son or daughter of Roger Williams. Before you begin one of the writings suggested below, make some notes in your notebook about these things:

- How old are you? Where do you live? What is your life like? List 5 facts about your life.
- What is your father like? Is he able to explain his beliefs to you? What concerns him? List 10 words which describe your father as a person.
- What does your father believe? List the beliefs you can recall. After you write down what you remember, check back in the textbook to be sure that you have noted all the principles stated there. Be sure to make your notes in your own words.

Now, you are ready to write. Choose one of the forms of writing suggested below. Use your lists and notes to write at least a page. These writings will be shared in class.

- * Write a diary entry in which you describe a conversation you overheard between your father and Governor Winthrop. Be sure to include the feelings you had about what you heard, some description of how your father seems to you, and statements of his beliefs and those of the governor.

OR

- * Write a letter to your cousin back in England explaining why your family is moving to Rhode Island. Be sure to include how you feel about the move, your father's beliefs and his differences with the governor, and some description of your father as a person.

ADAPT is a useful process: it can help the English teacher who is asked to assist his/her peers with the development of writing activities for content area classes; it can provide a guide for any teacher who wants to involve students in writing to learn and in writing about what they are learning. Using this process allows us to take generic forms of writing, identified thinking skills, and text materials from many sources and transmute them into successful classroom activities. In the end, as always, it is the individual classroom teacher who makes the difference—it is he or she who must "adapt" for the specific learning situations in which students write.

WORKS CITED

- Bazerman, Charles. "A Relationship Between Reading and Writing: The Conversational Model." *College English*, February, 1980, 656-662.
- Chittenden, Linda. "Sequences of Instruction, Intermediate Grades" in *Sequences of Writing K-13* (Berkeley, CA: National Writing Project, 1984), 10-19. Gere, Anne Ruggles, editor. *Roots in the Sawdust* (Urbana, IL: National Council of Teachers of English, 1986).
- Glatthorn, Allan. "Thinking and Writing" in *Essays on the Intellect* (Washington, DC: Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development, 1985), 67-88.
- Hillocks, George. "Inquiry and the Composing Process: Theory and Research." *College English*, November, 1982, 659-673.
- Shifsky, John and Eleanor Hoffman. "Designing Writing Assignments." *The English Journal*, December, 1977, 15-19.
- White, Edward M. *Teaching and Assessing Writing* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 1985).