THE "REAL WORLD" KNOCKS AT THE CLASSROOM DOOR

Dorothy Rutishauser
Edina, Minnesota

After weeks of the prescribed and dutiful paragraphs using cause and effect, comparison and contrast, description with details, explanation and examples, character sketch,and other formal expository types, my sophomore composition class looked a bit bored, bleak and bedraggled. It was time for a new approach. I wanted to bring the real world into the course; I wanted them to feel that composition mattered more than the grade they earned, that it was a life skill, every bit as important as swimming or driver education. The solution seemed obvious: a practical composition unit. James Moffett, at the Minnesota Conference on Composition in June, 1977, said students need an authentic audience for writing; they need to write real kinds of composition, things seen and used. It was amazing to see how interest and effort perked as my students saw how composition could yield direct benefits. The unit covered a variety of real needs in written communication:

1. How to write an essay test.
2. How to prepare a job resume.
3. How to write a cover letter for a job application.
4. How to write an essay portion of a college application.
5. How to write a memo.
6. How to take dictation and handle punctuation.
7. How to structure a business letter.
8. How to write a review.
9. How to write a precis.
10. How to write an invitation.

As we approached each form, I gave a brief introduction, and we discussed how the purpose of writing and the intended audience controlled content and form, as I showed samples on the overhead projector or on dittos. For example, in a resume the idea is to be very brief and objective (business men are busy people, as their name suggests) yet give enough information to arouse interest so that prospective employers would schedule a personal interview to learn more. The college application, on the other hand, should encourage as much unfolding of the student's unique subjective self as is possible in response to specified questions and in limited space. The aim is to make the application catch the attention of the admissions officers from among the thousands that may cross their desks.

The essay test was of most immediate interest, as we were approaching the end of the semester, so we began there. Students are frequently asked to write essay answers on tests, but rarely does a teacher pause long enough to explain how to study for an essay test or how to go about writing one effectively. We listed on the blackboard the kinds of questions that essay tests usually ask: compare...explain the growth or development of...what is the theme or central idea of...what does the symbolism mean...why does... what is the difference between...what is the significance or importance of...and so on. It seemed clear, then, that when students

study for an essay test, they should "second guess" the teachers and anticipate the kinds of analytical and interpretive questions that could be asked, then organize data and materials to answer these, with concrete evidence to support their answers.

The next step was to learn a method to take the essay test. Each student ultimately develops a personal system, but I gave them my own as a starter. I recommended reading the entire test first, choosing to take quick mental inventory of what they know relevant to each question before they begin writing. They should jot in margins or on backs of sheets one or two word clues to important ideas before they forget, an impromptu micro-outline. Then the writing can begin. Attack the hardest question first while they're still fresh and adrenalin is pumping strongly. Use the most important idea in the micro-outline, relating it to the central thesis, and move on to cover less important ideas or examples if time permits. Follow the "rule of three" if possible, such as three examples to support a thesis, three aspects of a problem, or three steps to a solution.(One could be the exception, two might be skimpy, but three is generally accepted as adequate development.) Allocate time in the test according to the relative value of the questions. All of this seems pretty elementary after you've answered a few hundred essay questions, but sophomores are at the beginning of the process, and this information comes as a great revelation to them.

To give us a basis on which to write an essay test, I asked the class to read several short stories: Ray Bradbury's "2026: There Will Come Soft Rains," John Updike's "A Sense of Shelter," John Ciardi's "A Cadillac Full of Diamonds," and Robert Penn Warren's "A Christian Education." Using blue book exam forms, such as they might see in higher level courses or in college, I asked several questions on the short stories. It was an "open book" test, since method rather than memory was my goal. I based evaluation of their essays not on how right they were or on the literary merit of their interpretations, but on how directly they attacked the central issue of the question, organized their information, supported their ideas with concrete evidence drawn from the stories, and how well they divided their writing efforts relative to the points assigned to the questions. In marginal comments I suggested "explain this" or "more evidence needed here" or"how does this support your thesis?" or "omit this sort of generalization -- it doesn't add anything to your answer and wastes valuable writing time" or "you need to expand that answer and spend less time on this."

The next area we explored concerned the economic values of composition. We visited our school career learning center, where vocational information and college catalogs are available, and where student employment data is channeled. This was better than scouring the newspaper want ads because these job openings were specifically aimed at their age level. They looked over available part-time and

summer job opportunities and selected likely prospects. Using these, we prepared two items: a succinct resume, including personal information, education (including extracurricular activities), employment experience and specific aptitudes, and references; and a cover letter, in correct business letter form, addressed to a real employer explaining the student's interest in a particular job offered. The items were evaluated from the point of view of a prospective employer: how well did the student present self? How interested in the job as indicated by care with which application was prepared? How well focused was it upon what the student could offer the employer rather than on what the job could do for the student? How well matched were interests, experience and abilities to the needs of the job? Papers were marked "Hired," or "Hold for further consideration," or "Thank you for writing. We will place your application on file." If students wished, they could send a copy of their letters and resumes to employers, and some chose to follow through on these.

Since most of these students were college bound, we discussed the differences, advantages and disadvantages of private and public colleges and universities, then looked at application forms. State universities typically have fill-in-the-blank type applications, but private schools often combine the objective information with a subjective essay section. I obtained a sample application from an Ivy League college and students filled out the essay portion, substituting whatever school they wished in the first question, "Why do you want to attend _____? What about the college do you find most appealing?" In this exercise, they tried to rise above the ordinary and predictable, to show insights and aspects of themselves that would make their application stand out from the crowd. Again, I made marginal suggestions and used "real world" evaluation: I marked the papers, "Congratulations! You have been accepted as a member of the Class of 1983," or "Your application is being held for further consideration," or "Thank you for your application. We regret that due to the large number of highly qualified applicants this year, it is unlikely that your application will be accepted, but we appreciate your interest and wish you success in your endeavors."

We moved on to deal with composition as part of the business world. I had run off a supply of half sheets of paper with the standard "To...From...Subject..." headings, and for several days we handled all instructions and questions by memo, which meant complete silence in the class, except for dictation. Notes between students, questions directed to me, and instructions to the class were all by memo, and they learned the economy and value of crisp, direct, clear prose. As a part of this activity, we reviewed the business letter form and punctuation rules. Then I dictated several letters (slowly, as they did not have shorthand skill) to give them experience in

deciding proper paragraphing and punctuation.

This next activity involved some writing skills they might need for other academic purposes. We had already completed a major unit on the research paper, so I chose the review and the precis. For the review, I gave them information on what a review does, the principles of a good review, plus some suggestions on ways to begin reviews or structure them, and samples of reviews on a variety of subjects: books, plays, movies, TV programs, art shows, etc. They watched a provocative seven-minute film called "Up Is Down" as the subject matter for a review. Precis writing was even simpler to present. I explained the purpose and method (via memo, of course) and gave them two articles from Time.

We ran out of time; otherwise, we might have undertaken even more projects. The list of possibilities grew as we went: note taking from lectures, preparing questions for an interview, writing a letter of inquiry, writing a sympathy letter, writing a "warm fuzzy" to a person they respected; writing a letter to the editor, writing a petition to the principal or city council, designing an application form for a school activity, writing or updating a student handbook with tips and information for new students, writing instructions on how to get to an address or how to perform a process; writing an introduction for a guest speaker....

Moffett was right when he stressed the need for a real purpose and a real audience to put "the will behind the mind" in the process of composition. All that was needed was to open the door and let the real world come in.