



### A Note from the Editors

The New York City Writing Project has survived and grown because people have stayed together. On Saturday mornings members gathered to write together and discuss what we were doing in our schools. We also worked together to shape how we would present the Bay Area model in workshops. We also got to see each other's apartments! Our collaboration has helped us grow both personally and professionally. We have learned that sharing is one of the most important parts of teaching.

This is the first issue of our newsletter. We hope you enjoy it. Please send us your contributions. We'd like to start a letters column and are looking forward to hearing your reactions to the newsletter and anything else of interest to teachers of writing. Please send your contributions to: NEWSLETTER, New York City Writing Project, Lehman College, Bronx, NY 10468

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Editors

### Don Murray Talks About Writing Fiction

Don Murray is a Professor of Writing at the University of New Hampshire. He is also a professional writer of both fiction and nonfiction. He has graciously given us permission to publish the following, which he originally presented at a session of the New York City Writing Project summer institute.

An interview with myself on writing fiction for the New York City Writing Project

#### WHY DO YOU WRITE FICTION?

Because it feels good to. It is an itch I have to scratch. Grace Paley said, "We write about what we don't know about what we know." I write about the things I have to

write about, the things I don't know I need to know.

#### HOW DO FICTION IDEAS COME?

As a line. For example, I recently made this note at a wedding, "She walked to the altar on the torn-up letters and snapshots of previous lovers." Stories also come from character, an image, from situation (a conflict), and sometimes, as an idea.

#### WHICH IS THE BEST WAY FOR THEM TO COME?

There is no best way, but I think we remember fiction mostly for character, and sometimes for information (information that teaches us about a world we don't know), rarely a plot, and, even more rarely, a theme.

WHAT DO YOU NOTICE FIRST WHEN YOU SEE A MANUSCRIPT?

The voice. The line that works, contains tension, a touch of surprise, authority, insight and forward motion. A line that has a voice, a single human voice.

WHAT DO YOU MEAN BY VOICE?

Intensity. Concern. Point of view. Angle of vision. Voice is the way language is used, but it is much more than that. Voice reveals the writer's character. It's knowing and feeling combined.

DOES EVERYONE HAVE A SINGLE IDENTIFIABLE VOICE?

Yes. You can tell a student's paper in a week or so without the name, but the range of that voice can be developed and extended.

DO YOU CONSCIOUSLY SEEK A VOICE FOR A STORY?

Yes. In some ways that's the most important thing you do. I wouldn't proceed on any writing until I found the voice of the work. I suppose that is a form of my own voice that fits what is becoming to be said.

HOW DO YOU SEEK VOICE?

You can't seek it. You have to wait for it, ear cocked, pen in hand.

HOW DO YOU RECOGNIZE IT?

By the way it sounds. You read it aloud. It sounds right. It contains energy.

WHAT DO YOU SEE AS THE MOST COMMON PROBLEMS IN STUDENT MANUSCRIPTS?

They start with pronouns instead of proper names. They write in the first person. A character is alone. A woman is in the kitchen after the family has left, a man in the hotel bedroom after the woman has left. Passive description. A self pitying monologue. There is no drama. The

significant action has taken place offstage.

IS THE FIRST PERSON EASY?

First person is harder than third person. It constrains you. Consider, for example, the problem of describing the I. The I has to become a character, separated from the writer and developed fully. That happens more easily in third person. The beginning writer has to detach himself or herself from what the writer knows so the writer can create a believable, imaginary world. The third person gives the writer some of that detachment.

SHOULD WRITING BE MORE DRAMATIC?

Yes, in two senses. It should be dramatic in the sense that something significant happens, something important: life, death, fear, love, hate, change.

And it happens between people. A character acts and another character reacts. That's the engine that makes fiction go.

DO YOU MEAN DIALOGUE?

Certainly. Dialogue is action. Most stories run on dialogue.

WHAT SHOULD YOU REMEMBER ABOUT DIALOGUE?

That people speak differently. Make their speech patterns different. Read aloud, and remember that the characters speaking to each other have a shared world. Write: "What's for breakfast?" Don't turn to the reader and explain that breakfast is the first meal of the day and that one of the characters likes it and one doesn't like it. Reveal that through dialogue. "Want an egg?" "I don't even want to smell you eating an egg."

WHAT ABOUT EXPOSITION AND DESCRIPTION?

Leave them in. Do not write chunks of description. Describe through the actions of the characters. Do not exposit; do not explain; show, rather than tell; reveal the story, don't talk about the story. Let the story tell itself. If you have an idea, write an essay.

YOU MEAN WRITING ISN'T THINKING?

It's a different kind of thinking, a significant and sophisticated cognitive act in which the thinking (the exploring) and the writing are done at the same time, something that usually happens in most good writing in every genre.

DO YOU MEAN IT'S A SORT OF DUMB WRITING?

It can be, but it shouldn't be, and it isn't when the writing is good. Fiction is a way the writer can gain distance on experience, stand back and see what life means.

HOW DO YOU ORGANIZE A STORY?

There are a few principles of organization, but they shouldn't be taken too seriously: Start as near the end as possible. Write in scenes of confrontation.

Each scene answers a question and asks a question. Yes, they are getting married, but will they stay married?

And not too much mystery. The best suspense is not "Will it happen?" so much as "How will it work out?" Inexperienced writers hold back too much; they give so little the reader couldn't care less. Read "Patriotism" by Mishima.

WHAT ABOUT POINT OF VIEW?

Don't worry about it if it isn't a problem, but if you're getting

confused just think where the camera is. If the camera is in my forehead I can see the look of pain on the face of the person across from me, but I can't see the knife in his back. It may help to read Forster's THE ART OF THE NOVEL.

WHAT OTHER BOOKS WOULD YOU READ?

Few. All of the PARIS REVIEW Interviews, the five or six volumes of WRITERS AT WORK, in print in Penguin Paperback. Probably the John Hersey anthology on writing that is still in print. Nancy Hale's THE REALITIES OF FICTION. But books on writing are much less important than writing.

WHAT'S THE MOST DIFFICULT PROBLEM YOU HAVE IN WRITING?

To maintain faith in what I'm doing. Not to judge what I'm writing too early. To let the story mature so it can stand up to my critical eye.

WHAT WOULD YOU REMIND THE BEGINNING WRITER TO DO?

To "write" as little as possible, to get out of the way, to allow the reader to experience the story.

Donald M. Murray  
The University of New Hampshire

Notice

Do you know the availability of Impact II Grants? Information is available at your school. The Board of Education booklet explains how to apply for replication grants of up to \$200.

On page 16 of the booklet there is a description of a grant received by Teacher-Consultant Ellen Shatz. The grant is entitled "Writers and Artists Work Here," and is based on the New York City Writing Project model. If you would like to talk with Ellen Shatz about how to apply for an impact grant, call the project office, 960-8758. If you leave your name and number, she will get back to you.

## What is the W.T.C.?

The New York City Writing Project is proud that two of its high school teacher consultants, Carla Asher and Marcie Wolfe, along with the directors of the New York City Writing Project, Sondra Perl and Richard Sterling, have received a three year grant from F.I.P.S.E. (Fund for the Improvement of Postsecondary Education) in cooperation with the New York City Board of Education and Lehman College. The grant is for the Writing Teachers Consortium, a project within the New York City Writing Project, designed to have a more concentrated impact on New York City schools. Currently four high schools are involved - Stevenson and Morris in the Bronx, and Art and Design and Seward Park in Manhattan. At each of these high schools, interested teachers from all disciplines attend an after-school workshop one day a week in the teaching of writing where they learn about methods and research in the teaching of writing. An important aspect of the workshops is giving the teachers an opportunity to do their own writing.

Both Carla Asher and Marcie Wolfe have been released from their full-time teaching responsibilities to work in the participating high schools helping teachers apply what they've learned in the workshop through informal discussions and demonstration lessons. The project is pleased to have the opportunity to involve up to thirty teachers in one school because when the Writing Teachers Consortium moves on to four other high schools next year, it will leave behind skilled writing teachers who are part of a network of teachers able to support each other in the difficult but rewarding task of teaching writing.

## Fourth Graders Keep Journals

Ellen Shatz is a fourth-grade teacher at P.S 41 in the Bronx who was a participant in the New York City Writing Project in the summer of 1980. Below is an excerpt from a progress report detailing some of the writing/reading projects her fourth-graders did:

From the first day of the term I have asked the children to keep journals. I write with them, and my writing has been about their writing. They seem to be very happy, less restless and very busy when they are writing in their journals. They believe now that the writing is private - that I will not read it and that I really will not even check to see that it is written. Some children have been willing to read their journal entries or talk about them to the class. John shared with the class that the teacher yells too much. It's so strange to see young children's reactions to being allowed to write anything they want - after a while they really do.

At another time of the day, the children's complete attention is captured by CHARLOTTE'S WEB. I have been reading to them. I know they don't understand all the vocabulary, but they sit in rapt attention.

I decided to do writing things from CHARLOTTE'S WEB, and that has been successful too. We talked about loneliness after I read the chapter describing Wilbur's loneliness and the children dictated their thoughts about loneliness. I duplicated their thoughts and that provided a good reading experience. They copied their thoughts into a class book and illustrated it. THE LONELY BOOK was dedicated to Wilbur, the lonely pig. Now, they are so proud. Whenever we have a visitor, THE LONELY BOOK is brought out.

When Charlotte entered the scene we talked about friends. Now, the children are working on A FRIEND BOOK. This, too, has been a successful time of the day.

## A N.Y.C. Writing Project Teacher Travels to London

Some Thoughts About My Summer:  
The London Language and Learning  
Institute

In 1978, I had the good fortune to take part in a summer writing institute sponsored by the New York City Writing Project. The institute reawakened an interest in my own writing. I discovered that many of my experiences could be shaped into poems or stories provided that I had a receptive and supportive audience to help me through the various stages of composing and revising. No longer did writing seem as lonely a task as it had when I was a student. With the aid of my writing group, I found my own quirky, humorous voice and was also willing to take risks where I never had before. Moreover, the project also provided me with new methods to guide, instruct, and assess student writing. I returned to teaching that September feeling revitalized and eager to transmit much of what I had felt and learned to both pupils and colleagues. Therefore, when I heard last winter that the National Writing Project was sponsoring a summer institute in London on Language and Learning Across the Curriculum, I was eager to attend. Once again, the experience proved to be unique and exciting.

The institute represented an attempt to bring American and British teachers together to work on a common concern: the decline in student writing and reading abilities. The goals of the institute, among others, were to

examine the ways in which children learn, and to see how a "Writing Across the Curriculum" policy could aid their learning. The project was headed by Robert Parker of Rutgers University and Donald Gallehr of George Mason University. They were joined by Bryan Newton, a curriculum consultant for the London Borough of Havering. All three men have been interested in the issue of writing in subject areas. Parker and Newton were editors with Nancy Martin and Pat D'Arcy of WRITING AND LEARNING ACROSS THE CURRICULUM, and Gallehr heads a state-wide Writing Across the Curriculum program affiliated with the Northern Virginia Writing Project.

The institute was attended by twenty-six American teachers (all members of various Writing Projects around the country) and ten British teachers (who worked in and around London). There were teachers from all over the United States: Arizona, California, Georgia, Hawaii, Nebraska, New Mexico, New York, North Carolina, Michigan, Montana and Virginia. As in the American Writing Projects, we were a heterogeneous group representing all levels of education. In addition, though most of us adhered to a similar philosophy regarding the teaching of writing, our backgrounds and experiences were extremely varied. We had teachers who taught Mexicans and Indians. Some of us taught in large urban centers while others worked in small towns of 1000 people. Needless to say, it was a thrill just to exchange anecdotes and to compare teaching situations.

We worked formally five days a week from nine to three-thirty, leaving evenings and weekends free for impromptu reading/writing groups and for touring. Our day began with a one and one-half hour talk or demonstration on some aspect of writing, reading, or talking in various subject areas. This was usually presented by a guest consultant. Later in the morning we broke up into small

writing groups (in which we worked on our own writing) or, on alternate days, seminar groups (in which we discussed some of the large number of books and articles we read prior to our arrival in London). In the afternoons, teachers gave demonstration lessons on an instructional technique that had proven successful in their own classes. The daily routine was modified when it was necessary. For example, one day the British teachers arranged to have us visit their schools while classes were still in session. Guess what? I was pleasantly surprised to learn that many British principals volunteer to teach a class or two each term, because they don't want to lose contact with the daily teaching experience!

The three weeks were exhausting, informative and fun. I came away from the experience with several thoughts I'd like to share with you:

1. What a great experience it was for teachers from different areas to be given the time and space to talk seriously about what happens in the classroom. During the school year, when do we have this opportunity? At a forty minute faculty conference? In the teacher's room? If nothing else, the National Writing Project has given classroom teachers the chance to share ideas and learn from each other.

2. Once again, I am amazed at how much good writing is produced as a result of the support that writing groups provide. On our last night in London, we held a "Read Around" in the college. We each chose one piece of our own writing that we wanted to share with everyone. The variety and power of the writing- from people who in the case of some British teachers, hadn't written in years- was remarkable. With encouragement and training, everyone can benefit from a writing group-especially students.

3. Whereas American educators

are just beginning to acknowledge the importance of writing in all subject areas, the British school system is confronting the same issue in a much broader manner. As a result of an educational survey reporting an alarming drop in the reading and writing abilities of British students, the government formed a committee to study the situation and make recommendations. The Bullock Committee confirmed the decline in standards and urged every British school to adopt a "Language Across the Curriculum" policy. Today faculties throughout England are examining the role language plays in every subject area. Teachers at all levels are starting to question the kind of reading, writing, and talking activities that exist in their classrooms. Is American education headed in the same direction?

4. We spent much time talking about the need for more "talk" in classes. Early in the institute, Joan Tough spent a day with us and presented some of her fascinating work on children and language. Ms. Tough has been videotaping and recording young children talking in groups and on a one to one basis with parents and teachers. She asserts that children are oriented not to talk in classrooms (or, sometimes, at home), and that is why many pupils have great difficulty in expanding their use of language. Tough, as well as many other researchers and educators, feels pupils need to have more opportunities in all subjects to explore ideas and digest new information by talking about it to each other.

With proper guidance, talking in groups need not lead to loss of control or lack of structure. Like reading and writing, talking can and should be used more often as a method for learning. I was particularly interested in Joan Tough's comments because many of my remedial writing students have

## Research in Progress

trouble in just talking to each other in writing groups. I now realize that they do not know how to hold a discussion because they probably have never been given enough practice in it at home or in school. Therefore, I hope to find more time for small group discussions within the framework of my lessons this semester.

5. If our pupils are being asked to do more writing and teachers are incorporating more written work into the curriculum, then shouldn't administrators be brought into this process of change as well? For example, in certain areas of the country, writing workshops have been held exclusively for principals. These principals not only wrote on matters of concern to themselves, but also became more sensitive to the writing process and the problems involved in establishing a "Language Across the Curriculum" policy in their schools. Administrators, like everyone else, need to be reacquainted with the writing experience.

6. There is still so much we don't know! Why wait for the so-called "experts" to find the answers? By observing and monitoring our own classes more carefully, teachers can discover so much about the way pupils read, talk, write, revise, etc. Why aren't more teachers given the opportunity and the means for research?

During the time I spent in London, I did a lot of work and thinking about my classes. As in 1978, I am returning to school now with renewed energy and an eagerness to get my students (and myself) writing and talking- and enjoying it.

Edward Osterman  
James Monroe High School

Sondra Perl, one of the directors of the New York City Writing Project, received a two-year grant this summer from the National Institute of Education to study how teachers teach the writing process. Sondra, a faculty member at Lehman College, is conducting this study in the Shoreham-Wading River school district on Long Island. The district has sponsored New York City Writing Project institutes for the past three summers. Nearly 100 teachers have attended the workshops since they began in 1979.

Sondra and two research assistants who are New York City Writing Project members, Jamie Carter, a high school teacher at Roslyn High School on Long Island, and Nancy Wilson, a teacher at Borough of Manhattan Community College, spend the major portion of their time in the Shoreham-Wading River district observing classes and conducting interviews with teachers, students, parents, and administrators. They have divided the school population among the three of them. Jamie is observing in the elementary schools, Sondra in the middle school, and Nancy in the high school. This gives them each a chance to see how teaching the writing process works on particular levels. Since Shoreham-Wading River is so far from their home bases, the three researchers stay in the district two to four nights a week at local homes and spend evenings and many days sharing insights, comparing field notes, and drawing conclusions based on what they've seen and heard.

All three members of the research team like having been plunged into a different kind of educational experience and are excited about what they are learning about how teachers teach the writing process.

## An Important New Book

### ACTIVE VOICE: A WRITING PROGRAM ACROSS THE CURRICULUM

by James Moffett, Boynton/Cook  
Publisher

Here is a book of thirty-two writing assignments that will delight teachers of all subjects. James Moffett, co-author of *STUDENT-CENTERED LANGUAGE ARTS AND READING K-13*, has recently written *ACTIVE VOICE*, a revised version of twenty-nine writing assignments that he created for experimentation when teaching at Phillips Exeter Academy in the early sixties. These assignments met with so much success that teachers duplicated and disseminated them throughout the United States. They have been, and still are, a great influence on the techniques used by teachers in National Writing Project sites across the country.

The assignments, which are based on a variety of modes of discourse, are divided into three groups: "Revising Inner Speech," "Dialogues and Monologues," and "Narrative into Essay." They vary in complexity from free "Stream-of-Consciousness" to crafted "Generalization Supported by Instances," and have been used successfully in elementary, secondary and post-secondary subject classes. To help the teacher, Moffett also includes recommendations for classroom processes of prewriting, midwriting and postwriting.

The updated version of the Exeter Exercises cautions against ways the original assignments were misused and clarifies misconceptions about sequence. It presents changes in the content and order of assignments based on experimental findings and offers additional assignments.

Moffett's program for writing across the curriculum does not hand the teacher a pat writing syllabus but a flexible series of writing tasks with options for

adaptation. *ACTIVE VOICE* is a valuable resource for the teacher who seeks successful ways to get students involved in meaningful writing.

In paperback, the 160-page *ACTIVE VOICE* is published by Boynton/Cook, a publishing house which was established in January, 1981, and which intends to publish only the finest books in the field of English education, "Not the usual hogwash." If you would like a copy of their catalogue, which includes a variety of helpful books on the teaching of writing by Moffett and others, write to: Boynton/Cook Publisher, Inc., 206 Claremont Avenue, Montclair, N.J. 07042

Johanna Mosca

Grace Dodge Vocational H.S.

## Social Studies and Writing

Linda Fulford, a social studies teacher at J.H.S. 232, was a participant in a New York City Writing Project workshop offered at the U.F.T. Teacher Center at Springfield Gardens High School in Queens, in the Spring of 1981. of social studies at Junior High School 232. She handed in the following report on the results of teaching a lesson based on the Writing and Learning presentation she had seen demonstrated by Marcie Wolfe of the Writing Project:

I have used the idea of expressive writing in a Social Studies lesson and both the students and I found the exercise to be very interesting and worthwhile.

We have been learning about South Africa and I told the students to read a news story entitled, "White Can Become Nonwhite in South Africa." I numbered each paragraph and asked -the students to make a written

## From the Steering Committee

comment about each paragraph as they read it. I told them the comment could be any reaction to the material: any criticism, question, negative or positive comment would be acceptable. I said their grade would depend on their doing the assignment and not on what they said. Some of the students asked again and again if they could write anything they wanted to write. After being reassured, the class settled down to the task. They read well and quickly, but the task took nearly one half the period. I did not hurry them. They worked quietly, and as they worked, I could "see" that they were thinking about the story. Some appeared shocked or annoyed as they read the account.

When they completed the work, I asked the class how they felt about the assignment, specifically if they preferred this kind of assignment to answering questions from the story. The majority preferred to give their opinions in this new way.

After our discussion about their preferences, I asked the students questions based on what they had read. All but a very few failed to pass the quiz. Not all had all questions correctly answered, but most grades were in the seventy to ninety range. These results were the same or better than grades these same students had received on similar quizzes given before on material read in class.

I enjoyed reading and discussing the comments and questions raised by the story, and I was pleased with the quiz results. The students enjoyed writing, hearing and participating in a discussion, and succeeding on the quiz. They were surprised that they had learned so much by the exercise. I will use this technique again.

We on the Steering Committee welcome this first issue of our newsletter. The New York City Writing Project has offered workshops to so many people in the last four years, we felt we needed a way of keeping in touch with all of you.

The Writing Project has grown quickly. The Project began as the Bay Area Writing Project in 1974 at the University of California. In 1977, the National Endowment for the Humanities funded the National Writing Project. There are now 90 National Writing Project sites in 43 states and Canada modelled after the original Bay Area Writing Project.

The New York City Writing Project started at Lehman College with twenty-five teachers in the summer of 1978. Since then we have offered an institute each summer and a number of workshop series during the year, either through school districts or, as in 1980-81, through U.F.T. Teacher Centers. We have also given numerous workshops at professional conferences. Elsewhere in this issue, you'll read about the Writing Teachers Consortium grant that has enabled the Writing Project to train a number of teachers in the same school. We believe this project will help turn around the way writing is taught throughout a school, from grade to grade, from discipline to discipline.

This newsletter is another new venture for the New York City Writing Project. We hope you'll consider it your forum for sharing successes, raising concerns, or just asking questions.

Sondra Perl, Lehman College  
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Robin Cohen, Lower E. Side Prep. H.S.  
Edward Osterman, James Monroe H.S.  
Steve Shapiro, A. Stevenson H.S.

