

# MODELING EARLY STAGES OF THE WRITING PROCESS

BY ROBERT POTTLE

Too often, when I was a teacher, I used only finished products as examples for my students. I would read a wonderful piece of children's literature, then discuss the elements that made it great. Perhaps, I would even design a rubric based on the elements of the wonderful literature that I had read. How could anyone go wrong with a well crafted rubric in hand? Next, I'd give the students a blank piece of paper and say, "Now, you write a story." What the students didn't get to see was the process used to create a wonderful story. What the students often missed, was that there was a real person writing that story. A real person, making real mistakes.

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When students see only the finished product, they have no way of knowing that the first draft of the story very likely had run on sentences, sentence fragments, missing punctuation, fractured story lines, and even (gasp) misspelled words. Showing students only the finished works and not the process, is the same as taking them to a magic show and upon returning to the classroom asking them to pull a rabbit out of their own hats. We have to teach students how to do the tricks - the process, including the ugly parts. The best trick I know for great writing is revision.

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Students should be exposed to the early and often ugly part of the writing process. If you are fortunate, you may find an author willing to share this sometimes private part of the writing process with your class. Short of that, write with your students. Brainstorm with them, make mistakes,

find mistakes, correct mistakes, cross things out, rearrange, trim excess, strengthen imagery, experiment with point of view, model for your students what a writer does. If the piece that you're writing just isn't work-

ing, put it aside for a while and start something new. This is the the writing process. The end results can be magical, but the early stages are often down right ugly, at least for me. My pile of poems that aren't working is usually three times taller than my pile of good poems.

One activity that I use when writing with a group of students, is a web. We start like any normal web, with the main topic in the middle and subcategories branching off that. After we have a healthy bunch of words to work with, I have students add opposites to the web, for those words that have any. Sometimes very little comes from this part of the activity, but often the twist or the humor of the poem comes from thinking about opposites.

After the opposites start to run dry, I have the students suggest rhyming words for the words listed so far. If you are not writing rhyming poetry with your class, you could easily substitute another literary device such as alliteration or assonance. I like to have the students produce a bank of rhyming words before they begin working on their poem. Once students begin actually writing a poem they seem unwilling to make a list of rhyming words to use. If they have a bank to withdraw from before they begin, it seems to make the writing process go more smoothly, even if they don't use any rhymes from the bank in their poem.

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By the time we get to this point, the ideas for a poem have started flowing naturally, and that nasty, “I don't know what to write.” stage has been avoided. The ideas will be coming faster than the pen can write. This is good. The end product of this stage of the writing process is usually a mess. This is also good. In that mess, there are likely disjointed fragments of a good poem. Those good fragments have a certain glow to them. The students see that good writing must be excavated and mined, through the process of revision, and not some magic trick to be completed in a thirty minute writing period. Modeling this early and imperfect stage of the writing process shows students not just an end product, but a way to get there. Over emphasis on assessment tends to focus too heavily on the product. The end product is important, but it is the process that gets us there.