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Introduction: The End

Why would a book entitled *The Write Beginning* begin with "The End"? It's because the end is the best place to start. Having a clear picture of what a final product will look like ensures that we can identify the important elements and understand how they all fit together purposefully.

Returning from a local big-box store, a young family gathered together to cut open the cardboard box that contained a recently purchased large item of furniture. The box itself seemed rather compact, not at all large enough to contain the bulky item that had been purchased. They anxiously opened the box and began to pull random pieces of wood, bits of iron, and fasteners from it. The pieces quickly spread around the room and in no way resembled the item of furniture that they were hoping to have in the end. Searching through the box, they located the instructions for assembly. Beginning with the largest pieces, they started to combine the elements together in the way that was described in the manual. It was not long before they discovered that they were in over their heads with their construction project, and the frustration level started to escalate. How does one attach a hinge to a door? Do the doors open in or out? Which one goes on the left and which one on the right? How do all the pieces fit together in a way that is meaningful? It was the seven-year-old future engineer who came to the rescue. She eagerly found the lost piece of cardboard that clearly illustrated the final product—the picture on the box. She simply stated: "I know where this piece goes—it shows you on the picture on the box." The family found they could examine the picture of their goal and determine how the pieces should fit together. It wasn't long before the random pieces started to resemble the final product, their goal. Although they needed to carefully follow the step-by-step directions, it was the illustration that kept them focused on the final product. It was their beacon, their target, their exemplar. They were able to measure their progress in terms of how closely their work resembled the target. They knew that, in the end, all the pieces would fit together, and they would have a final product similar to the one on the cover of the box.

This story illustrates the importance of setting clear goals with young writers. If they have a clear picture of the final product, they will find it easier to determine how the seemingly random pieces may fit together. By keeping this target in mind, they will gain the perspective to step back from the frustration of the moment and see the bigger picture. It gives them a clear goal, and they can measure their success as writers in terms of this goal. They understand how and why the pieces fit together, and will find it easier to apply their learning. If writers begin with a clear vision of the final product, the individual skills associated with it seem to lose their randomness and become integral components of the complete piece. Begin with the big picture, break it into the smaller compo-

nents, then use these components to construct the complete piece. Simple—just like assembling furniture!

We have all heard the adage, "Begin with the end in mind." This is a familiar concept to many in the business world. Stephen Covey's *Seven Habits of Highly Effective People* describes the importance of having a clear vision of a goal and setting a personal mission statement to help reach this desired outcome. This is intended to help align one's actions with values and principles as a way of striving to achieve the desired outcome.

Stephen Covey may have coined the phrase, but the principle is an underlying belief in most successful teaching philosophies. Students need to have a clear vision of the expectations and learning outcomes, as well as the ways in which they will demonstrate their learning. They need a clear vision of the assessment process that will be used to evaluate their work, and they need to see their learning as purposeful, valuable, and authentic. As young writers, they need to understand the final target, identify the components that make it successful, and receive feedback along the way. Rick Stiggins (2006) believes that "students can hit any target that they know about and holds still for them." When we work with students to set clear targets, they are much more able to reach these goals.

What is the End? The end is the final target that we set with our students. It is the final product, the goal that the students need to reach. To begin with the end in mind means that the students have a clear understanding of the product they will be required to produce, knowledge of the elements they need to include, and a thorough understanding of the process with which they will be assessed. This ensures that students are active participants, rather than passive observers, in the assessment process. With assessment-based learning, there is no surprise for students, there is no mystery, and there is an open dialogue between student and teacher. Students have a clear understanding of the target, a realistic understanding of how far they are from it, and what they need to do in order to reach it. When we use assessment-based learning, we are involving our students in understanding the criteria for success and actively participating in creating the tools with which they will be evaluated.

Anne Davies (annedavies.com) describes the role of assessment-based learning: "In order to support student learning, classroom assessment needs to involve students deeply in the assessment process, provide specific, descriptive feedback during the learning, and include evaluative feedback as required to communicate and report progress over time." She states,

> Students need to know what they already know, what needs to be learned and what success looks like. Students also need to learn how to guide their own learning through being involved in setting and using criteria, giving themselves feedback for learning, setting goals, collecting evidence and communicating that evidence of learning to others.

As we involve students in their assessment, they become self-reflective self-monitoring learners who assume more responsibility for their learning. They show greater engagement and a deeper understanding of their strengths and needs as learners. When students actively participate in setting goals, they are able to articulate their learning and use assessment as a tool from which they can continue to learn, rather than a final summative evaluation.

Using assessment-based learning to strengthen students' writing is highly beneficial. Not only do young learners become better writers, but they become

more competent at articulating their strengths and setting goals for their next piece of work. Using exemplars and mentor texts helps students understand high levels of writing and determine the features of each piece that make it successful. Involving students in setting success criteria enables them to see the elements in each mentor text and set realistic targets to include in their own writing. In this way, we move away from a focus on conventions and toward a focus on content, style, voice, and form. Students need to be encouraged to take risks and try creative things with their writing, improving their word choice and ideas. Involving students in discussions about their writing through descriptive feedback enables young writers to articulate their strengths, needs, and desires for their work. They are able to point out the features they think are strong, experiment with new strategies, and set goals for their continued growth.

CHAPTER 1   *Working with the End in Sight*

The Assessment-Based Writing Process

For years, the writing process has been defined in five recognizable steps: Prewriting, Drafting, Revising, Editing, and Publishing. We recognize that students need to spend time thinking about what they need to write before they write it; they need to take the time to create a draft; they need to revise and edit as a way of improving the piece and preparing it for sharing with others in the final stage.

The Traditional Writing Process

Prewriting
Drafting
Revising
Editing
Publishing

The Traditional Writing Process

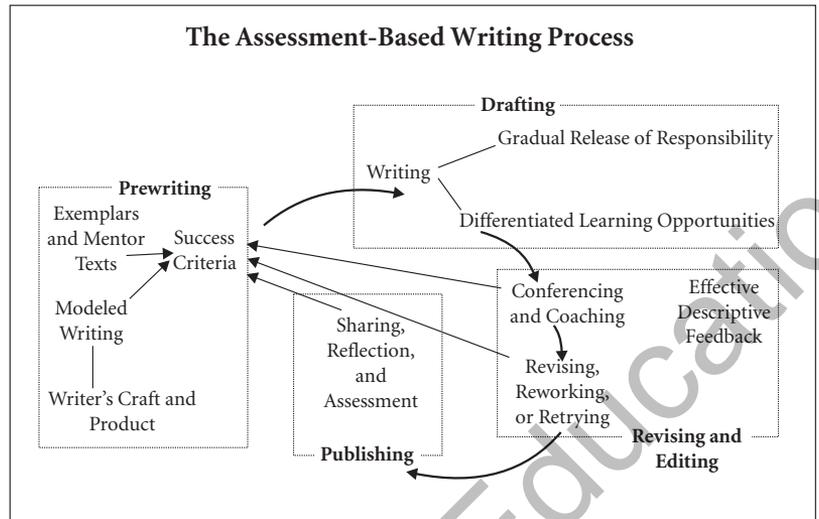Prewriting → Drafting → Revising → Editing → Publishing

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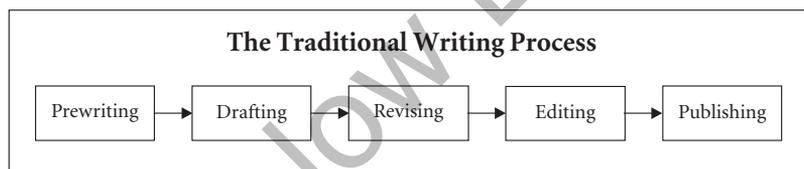
However, critically missing from this traditional writing process is the initial goal-setting that students need to do to determine their personal targets for the piece, and the feedback and guidance of the teacher (and self and peers) to gently shape the piece. The writing process is not a linear one as presented in this typical model, where a piece starts at the beginning with students prewriting their ideas, and ends when the piece is published. Instead, the writing process is recursive. This means that the writer is constantly revisiting the previous stages and finding new ways of refining a piece of writing in order to improve it. Writers do not wait until they have completed their first draft to begin revising —they are constantly rereading and reworking the piece, gradually shaping it in the direction that is pleasing to them as authors, while continuing to draft more. Likewise, an author may choose to add to or delete portions of the text that were initially included during the prewriting stage. The writing process is not linear. Instead it is a fluid process: writers understand and set goals for their work; then begin to draft, revise, draft some more; possibly revise again, even revisiting the initial prewriting and adjusting it accordingly; then draft and revise once more in order to bring the piece closer to their goals.

The Assessment-Based Writing Process

Prewriting: Establishing Success Criteria
Drafting: The Writing Process
Revising and Editing: Using Descriptive Feedback
Publishing: Sharing, Reflection, and Assessment

In most writing processes, teacher feedback is given after students have completed the entire writing process and have published a finished piece. Feedback at this point may serve to evaluate or motivate the students' future writing endeavors; however, it does not provide much practical guidance for the task at hand. For this reason, teacher feedback should occur throughout the entire writing process, but is most effective when the student is working on revising the piece. This is when the teacher and student together can reflect on the goals for the piece, measure its success, and refine any areas that need work.

The recursive assessment-based writing process is one that we need to develop in young writers. It is not a simple linear five-step process; instead it is a series of important processes in developing and refining a piece of writing.

The Assessment-Based Writing Process

Drafting

Gradual Release of Responsibility

Writing

Differentiated Learning Opportunities

Prewriting

Exemplars and Mentor Texts

Success Criteria

Modeled Writing

Writer's Craft and Product

Sharing, Reflection, and Assessment

Conferencing and Coaching

Effective Descriptive Feedback

Revising, Reworking, or Retrying

Publishing

Revising and Editing

The assessment-based writing process is based on the primary belief that all students can achieve their goals, as long as the goals are clear and students have had the opportunity to understand the expectations included in the target. An essential teaching component is the conferencing and coaching stage, at which the teacher provides descriptive feedback to the students. Through this stage, the teacher helps to refine the students' work and bring it closer to their goal.

Prewriting: Establishing Success Criteria

The assessment-based writing process begins with the students developing a clear understanding of the writing goal through the use of mentor texts, exemplars, or modeled writing. The purpose of the prewriting stage is that students develop a key understanding of the piece of writing they will need to create. Through this stage, students will develop a solid understanding of the craft of constructing the writing, the product that they will create, and the features that will make it successful.

Once students have a clear understanding of the task that is expected of them they will have a much greater chance of meeting with success.

Through the examination of mentor texts, exemplars, or modeled writing, students and teacher are able to construct a list of features that make the work successful—the success criteria. This becomes the backbone for their work. The success criteria are the targets that students set for their own writing, and that will serve as the measures of their success. Success criteria can include targets relating to the form of the writing, the ideas included in the writing, the way the writing is communicated, and the way the students use their writing to connect to themselves. They are the key features of a successful piece of writing that students will strive to include in their own work.

For example, when writing a report, students may include the following as success criteria for a piece:

- I will remember to include an introduction and a conclusion that summarizes my main point.
- I will include interesting content and sufficient supporting details.
- I will use conventional spelling, grammar, and punctuation.

- I will evaluate which information is important, and determine if it is suitable to include in the writing. If it is not suitable, I will gather more information.

Before students are asked to write a piece in a particular form, they need to develop their background knowledge about it. They need to have some exposure to the components and purpose associated with the form of writing. Imagine being asked to write a doctoral dissertation, never having seen one before in your life. You probably would struggle with many things; for example, what voice is appropriate, when and how to cite references, and if it is appropriate to include your own opinion on the subject. Many of our students feel the same about being asked to write many forms of writing. For example, some might have very limited experiences with letters; however, we might mistakenly assume that it is a form that they are familiar with. Others may have read many narratives, but never really stopped to think about the elements they contain. Through exposure to exemplars or mentor texts, students are able to develop an understanding of the specific form of writing and attend to the details that are necessary to include in their own work.

As students explore mentor texts and exemplars, we need to help them become conscious of the different parts, as well as the components of writing that make them successful. When sharing mentor texts or exemplars with students, we need to specifically draw their attention to things like how these pieces are constructed and the effect they have on the reader. We can not assume that students will incidentally discover the things we wish them to learn. We need to scaffold their learning by providing a framework for their thinking.

Modeled writing gives the students a clear understanding of the process and product associated with the writing task. When students observe the teacher working through the craft of drafting a piece of work, they are able to develop an understanding of the strategies they will have to apply themselves in order to complete the task. Through modeled writing, the teacher also demonstrates the product that students will work toward. In this way, youngsters are able to develop an understanding of the necessary elements contained in the writing piece. When teachers model writing, they point out when they are thinking of the elements of the writing and the craft associated with writing it. They direct the students' attention to their modeling of the elements of the piece, often using think-alouds to share their thinking with students, so they can have a better understanding of the different elements of the piece and the writer's intent to include them all.

A teacher needs to be conscious of the craft of drafting a piece of work. As writers, we are constantly thinking and rethinking the way we want to organize our words, phrases, and ideas to best communicate our thoughts to the reader. When modeling, teachers need to bring this process alive for students, articulating the thought processes associated with effective writing and constantly engaging in a reflective process. They are thinking of the ideas, words, and phrases, as well as constantly refining the writing, searching for words, and reorganizing ideas in ways that would best represent the piece.

The prewriting stage allows students to think about the form of writing, explore other samples of the writing, and develop a solid understanding of the success criteria associated with it. Through the establishment of the success criteria, students are then able to reflect on their own writing and measure their progress in terms of it. As the writing continues, students are able to reflect on

Using mentor texts or exemplars during the prewriting stage assists students in developing a clear understanding of the things they will need to include in their writing to become more successful.

the success criteria and use the mentor texts, exemplars, or modeled pieces as a guide to shape their own work. The success criteria become the targets for the writing, and students are able to focus on this target as they begin to write and later revise their work. The success criteria are the agreed-upon set of skills that the teacher will use to provide feedback to students, and eventually use to assess their learning. This recursive writing process has students revisit their writing and continually reflect on ways to improve it; it is also recursive in that the success criteria that are developed in the early stages of writing continue to serve as the target for writing throughout the entire process. The success criteria are the constant beacon that helps guide students' writing and shape their learning.

Drafting: The Writing Process

During the drafting stage, the students are able to craft their own writing. There are a wide range of experiences that students may explore when experimenting with new forms of writing. Through this stage, the teacher can use various levels of support to assist students in the creation of their writing. This gradual release of responsibility helps students develop greater independence in a scaffolded approach. Some students work cooperatively with their peers, others need a little more support through a guided writing format, while others are ready to try working independently. The teacher will need to develop flexibility through this stage, and adapt the instruction to the differing needs of the students.

This is also the time when students might have differentiated opportunities surrounding their learning. Some students need access to technology, while others need a slightly different instructional approach—like chunking the writing into smaller, more manageable components. This is where teaching becomes a balance of science and art. As teachers, we become very adept at identifying which students can learn best in which circumstances. There are many different learning opportunities that can be provided to students to best support their various learning styles. As students are drafting their writing, we need to provide a classroom in which diversity is acceptable; although the students all strive toward the same success criteria, the route that each one takes to get there may be different. Writing is not necessarily an on-your-own-in-a-quiet-corner activity—although for some it might be just that. Others might need the social atmosphere of sharing their ideas orally with their peers, or writing cooperatively through shared writing experiences. Finally, others might thrive while working in a small, focused writing group with an adult.

Regardless of the style of learning or the level of support, throughout their writing time students need to remain mindful of the success criteria that were carefully established in the prewriting stage. The success criteria guide the students' writing by outlining very clear expectations and targets. As the students begin to draft and reflect on their writing, having a clear understanding of the success criteria will help them to focus on the important aspects of their writing.

Revising and Editing: Using Descriptive Feedback

Once students have had the opportunity to explore the writing form and draft a piece, the teacher provides descriptive feedback. This feedback is crucial for students to move forward in the writing process. There is no purpose in providing feedback on completed writing pieces (once the student has published the piece), since there is no room for making improvements at that stage. The time

Through the drafting stage, we need to be aware of the different strategies and skills that students have, the wide range of interests and prior experiences they bring, and the areas with which they need support.

At this early stage in the writing process, it is easier to help students to think critically about their writing.