

Nonstop Writing

AN UNGRADED CLASSROOM ACTIVITY

In my experience teaching across the globe, I have found that the need for new teaching approaches is greatest in the area of student writing. Students everywhere seem to find writing a daunting task. They frequently complain that as soon as they pick up their pencils, their minds go blank. All too often we see panic set in among students who believe that their teacher is going to mark them down for every “i” they don’t dot, every “t” they don’t cross, and every error they might make in spelling, structure, or vocabulary.

The fact is, many would-be writers feel defeated before they even begin writing and are paralyzed by their feelings of inadequacy and insecurity. Techniques such as graphic organizers can help students overcome their anxiety about writing, particularly at the initial stage when students are groping for ways to get started on their assignment. But the technique I have found most rewarding for students and teachers alike in fighting writer’s block is Nonstop Writing.

Nonstop Writing is exactly what the term implies. The students do in-class, non-graded, timed writing on an assigned topic—without stopping. In my workshops across the world, the first questions I hear from my host-country counterparts are: “Why do a writing exercise that is not to be graded? How do you expect students to learn from their mistakes?” My response is always the same: “There is a place for graded writing exercises, but this particular ungraded exercise is valuable because it enables students to communicate their thoughts without fear of judgment of any kind. When students are allowed to write

freely without fear of evaluation, we convey to them that their *message* has value.”

To give the teachers in my workshops the experience of Nonstop Writing as an organizational and tension-reducing tool, I provide them with a brief reading on the gradual extinction of languages that is occurring across the world. Before doing the reading, however, the teachers are asked to guess how many languages exist in the world. We discuss whether or not it is important to individual societies and the world at large to maintain less-spoken languages. Time is then allowed for reading the passage.

When the reading activity is finished, the teachers are given the steps for the writing exercise and I put the following statement on the board: “All the world’s languages should be reduced to four.” (To spur debate, the statement could later be revised to say, “All languages should be maintained.”) I stipulate that even though they may disagree with the statement, they must use the “think three” rule, which requires them to support my statement with at least three reasons, all explained in narrative form. At this point, someone usually asks: “What if I can’t think of anything to say?” I respond by saying: “Then write *I can’t think of anything to say, I can’t think of anything to say*, until your thoughts start flowing again.” This usually gets a chuckle and reduces tension, which is one of the benefits of the exercise.

Nonstop Writing procedure

The following is the simple Nonstop Writing procedure used to help students organize their

writing and provide supporting evidence for their assertions:

- The topic is written on the chalkboard.
- Students have one minute of “think” time (pencils on the desk), to organize their thoughts.
- The teacher says, “You may begin, now” and notes the time.
- Students begin writing and must continue writing for exactly five minutes, no more, no less.
- The teacher says: “Time. Please put down your pencils.”
- Students then have one minute to self-edit. If they have a spelling question, they may ask the teacher to write the word on the chalkboard.
- Students are asked to volunteer to read their compositions aloud.

Students who do not read aloud *may* hand in their compositions for the teacher to read, but not grade. The only thing the teacher does is write a brief, positive comment at the end of the paper so that the student will know that it has been read—something as simple as “Thanks for the effort,” or “Interesting idea,” or just a smiley-face will do. Commenting in this way should be done on all papers that students hand in because they are important contributors to the student’s progress and sense of self-worth.

Uses for Nonstop Writing

In addition to helping reduce the paralyzing fear and anxiety felt by many students facing a new writing project, Nonstop Writing has other virtues. One is its flexibility; it can be used at any time and with virtually any subject. Because the students are assured that there are no right or wrong answers, the Nonstop Writing exercise encourages them to freely express their opinions on any topic. Moreover, the exercise can be used with content-based instruction as:

- a pre-reading activity by itself, or as a follow-through after the development of a web or other graphic organizer for writing purposes
- a mid-way activity to predict the outcome of an event
- a post-reading activity
- a written reaction to an event described in the reading

- a comment or letter addressed to a character in the reading
- an evaluation of the text

Students could also do a “write-back” associated with Nonstop Writing; that is, they could write a letter to the author of a reading or to some other person connected with the reading—past, present or future, real or fictional. In Russia, I have had students read the works of the poet Alexander Pushkin, after which they do a five-minute “write-back” to Pushkin about one of his works. They might, for example, write a personal letter to him discussing the impact of his literature on the student, the society in which the student lives, or the world at large. I have the students start their letter to Pushkin with, “Dear Sasha,” (the nickname for Alexander). The students giggle at this familiarity and thus are put at ease. Nonstop Writing and “write-back” exercises also are valuable when used in conjunction with a real event in the students’ lives because they enable the students to voice on paper what they might not feel comfortable saying out loud.

Another benefit of the nonstop five-minute writing exercises is that in areas where national examinations require students to write timed essays, the exercises give students practice writing “against the clock.” After my teenage students in Cairo had taken their end-of-year examinations, I asked them about the essay portion of the exam. Several agreed that the timed writing portion of the test was the “easiest part of the exam.”

Incorporating Nonstop Writing and the “think three” strategy once or twice a month takes very little time and results in increased willingness by students to produce written work; a strengthening of the organization, development, and fluency of their writing; and fewer writing errors.

I encourage teachers to give the Nonstop Writing exercise serious consideration. It can help reduce much of the tension and anxiety students feel at the beginning of a writing assignment, provide an organizational framework for writing, and present students with a nonjudgmental forum for their written expressions.

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