WRITTEN COMPOSITION IN THE
INTERMEDIATE GRADES

APPROVED:

E. C. Ballard
Major Professor

F. L. Elder
Minor Professor

E. S. Clifton
Director of the Department of English

Robert B. Toulouse
Dean of the Graduate School

The problem with which this study is concerned is the development of a program for teaching composition skills to children in the intermediate grades. The study is based on a survey of research, reports, books, and articles in the field, and on the teaching experience of the author. These sources reveal the need for improvement in composition teaching, and further indicate that this improvement ought to begin at the elementary level. The fact that the majority of elementary teachers are poorly trained and inadequately equipped to teach composition is evidence of the need for some type of helpful, organized program.

The organization of the study follows the actual steps in initiating a program for composition teaching in the intermediate grades. An effective composition program must be based on positive attitudes toward the teaching of writing. The importance of the role of the teacher cannot be overemphasized, for composition instruction demands particular teaching qualities. The teacher must have a sincere interest in children, an awareness of their needs, the ability to fulfill those needs in part through composition activities, and the resources for providing positive motivation. In addition, an effective composition program must have structure. It must
be based on objectives which arise out of children's needs, and it requires a teacher who can meet these objectives by providing meaningful and appropriate composition activities. Composition instruction must be individualized to the extent that the entire program becomes child-centered.

Children who have not had composition instruction in the primary grades need a great deal of freedom and encouragement in the beginning stages of the program. The new activities for initiating the program are planned to provide this freedom, to build the child's confidence in himself as a writer, and to give the child structured experiences which will increase his ability to express himself in writing. The composition program as presented follows a trend of decreasing structure based on increasing confidence and ability in students. Each child is expected to do his own thinking and writing, but he receives the benefit of group experiences and structured discussions so that he will have something to write.

Children's writing is best discussed and taught in terms of purposes for writing. Writing for direct, communicative purposes is termed practical writing, while personal writing includes the subjective, self-expressive work. Since all of children's writing is creative to some extent, this division is not an inflexible one; however, it is useful in describing composition activities based on purposes for writing, as are the lessons presented in this study.
Of major importance in the total communication cycle is the process of sharing what one has written for the purpose of building evaluative skills. Thus publication and evaluation must become an integral part of every composition experience. The importance of developing powers of self-evaluation is stressed throughout the study, as is the necessity for appropriate publication of the products of composition instruction.
WRITTEN COMPOSITION IN THE
INTERMEDIATE GRADES

THESIS

Presented to the Graduate Council of the
North Texas State University in Partial
Fulfillment of the Requirements

For the Degree of

MASTER OF ARTS

By

Alice L. Coody, B. S.
Denton, Texas
December, 1970
# TABLE OF CONTENTS

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Chapter</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>I. INTRODUCTION</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>II. REQUIREMENTS OF AN EFFECTIVE COMPOSITION PROGRAM</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Role of the Teacher</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Needs</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Objectives</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Implementation</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Motivation</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>III. NEW ACTIVITIES FOR INITIATING THE PROGRAM</td>
<td>28</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The &quot;Personal&quot; Notebook</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Unfinished Statements</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sensory Activities</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>IV. NEW APPROACHES TO OLD ACTIVITIES</td>
<td>44</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Writing Letters</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Writing Directions</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Reporting Events</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Newspaper</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Book Reports and Reference Papers</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>V. CREATIVE APPROACHES TO PERSONAL WRITING</td>
<td>53</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Values of Personal Writing</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Effective Personal Writing Situations</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>VI. EVALUATION AND PUBLICATION</td>
<td>66</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>BIBLIOGRAPHY</td>
<td>74</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

A study of research on written composition indicates an increasing concern with the failure of the high school graduate to exhibit adequate ability in written expression. Joseph Mersand conducted a national survey of attitudes toward the teaching of English, and concluded that "most of the recommendations for the improvement of English instruction were in the area of written composition" (4, p. 342). These recommendations for the improvement of written expression include the belief that composition instruction must begin in the elementary grades if it is to be effective. George Leonard, in criticizing the writing ability of today's high school graduate, stated that "straightforward, clear writing is rarely learned in business or the professions. Many experts, in fact, feel that high school is too late" (3, p. 106). Such attitudes emphasize the responsibility of the elementary school to provide effective programs for written composition, but ignore the problems inherent in such an undertaking.

Scholars point out several serious problems in the teaching of written composition in the elementary school. One such problem is that teachers are inadequately prepared to teach composition. Research studies conducted by the
National Council of Teachers of English show that the median state requirement in English for elementary certification is only six semester hours, and that "specialized courses concerned with the teaching of the language arts . . . are not uniformly required" (5, p. 45). Problems originate also in the areas of content, methods, and materials. In his study of issues and problems in the field of elementary language arts, Walter Petty stated that "there are disagreements as to the state of written composition teaching today, what the specific objectives of writing teaching should be, and how instruction should be given" (6, p. 187).

To add to the difficulty of teaching composition, many language textbooks have, until recently, called for very few composition experiences, and these were often so dull and so rigidly structured that they stifled the natural desire of children to write. The problem of sketchy, inadequate treatment of composition in language textbooks is compounded by the unique nature of composition teaching itself. Its uniqueness lies in its heavy dependence on the knowledge and skill of the individual teacher. A mediocre teacher can teach mathematics provided that he has an adequate textbook, and the teaching of reading is facilitated by a wealth of supplementary aids so that even a poor teacher can achieve some measure of success. But this is not true with the teaching of composition. Prerequisite to effective teaching of composition are thorough knowledge of the skills involved, of
children's writing capabilities, and of the thinking processes which are the basis of composition. These are areas which many language textbooks have either ignored or treated inadequately: they are also areas in which the majority of elementary teachers are poorly trained. In emphasizing these areas, this study proposes to serve as a supplement to the teacher and the language textbook in building an effective composition program for the intermediate grades.

In an interview with *Look* magazine several years ago, James Squire, then Executive Secretary of the National Council of Teachers of English, expressed grave concern over the lack of research in the area of written composition, stating that there had been "six or seven times as much research on reading as on the whole area of written expression" (3, p. 106). In summing up the status of written composition in the elementary grades, he stated further that "the main thing is thinking, and we really don't know how thinking develops" (3, p. 106). In the years since this somewhat pessimistic viewpoint was expressed, a great deal of progress has been made. For example, the new textbooks for elementary language have placed increased emphasis on the thinking processes which underlie all forms of communication. An example of this recognition is found in the material for teachers accompanying the Harper and Row texts, where this statement is found: "Throughout this series we emphasize that language is a tool of thought" (1, p. T-13). These
and other textbooks have made provision for extensive opportunities for both teachers and students to extend their knowledge of writing skills and how they can be developed.

In discussing children and their writing, it is necessary to have a clear concept of what composition is and what it involves. Composition, or the act of composing, is a difficult and complicated process. Whatever the raw materials, the tools, and the skills involved, composing is an arduous and demanding task. The musician may know all the musical notes, he may have the musical instrument before him, and he may possess the ability to play it. He may even have in his mind the sounds of the music he wants to produce. But before he can compose, he must somehow have achieved the ability to put his music into written form. Similarly, an artist equipped with brushes, paints, canvas, and easel cannot paint the pictures he sees in his mind until he has learned the techniques and skills basic to the art of painting. In the same way, a child in the intermediate grades may have something to say, and most of them do. Having mastered the handwriting skills in the primary grades and having the tangible tools of writing before him, how can a child achieve the ability to put on paper in an organized fashion the thoughts that he has in his mind? This is a basic question of method with which this study is concerned. There are similarities to be found among musicians, painters, and writers, but this study does not assume that the schools
should attempt to turn out writers as professionals, any
more than that they should produce professional musicians and
painters. Instead, this study recognizes the fact that, just
as art and music do, writing requires creativity. All three
demand originality, organization, and skill for successful
productivity. And the fact is that, just as one can be
taught to paint, or to compose music, one can be taught to
write. These are not talents with which children must be
born. It is true that not all children can be taught to
paint a great picture or compose lovely music, but almost all
children can be helped toward improvement in these creative
areas, and the same things are true of writing.

For the sake of clarity, this study is based on a broad
concept of the term composition. Concepts of composition
vary widely, with each teacher having his own idea of what
it is or what it ought to be. To some, composition consists
of drilling in writing correctly, with little or no concern
for what the children are saying. Others think of com-
position as creative writing only and move to the opposite
extreme of completely ignoring correctness while stressing
content. Both extremes succeed in narrowing the approach to
composition, thus hampering its development. Growth in
writing involves growth in thinking, reading, listening,
talking, spelling, punctuating, and the use of words. For
younger children, it also involves the motor-mental act of
directing the writing instrument (7, p. 5).
Children are constantly faced with the need to write things down. Such tasks as copying material from the chalkboard or copying exercises from the handwriting text are not here considered to be composition, since these tasks produce nothing that is the result of organized thinking. Excluding such writing as this, almost everything else the child writes can be construed as composition. If he writes a note and slips it to a classmate, he has composed. If he carefully chooses a word which accurately suits a particular need, he is composing. Thus, for the purposes of this study, composition may be defined as writing with a purpose other than that of copying material or building handwriting skills. As in many books and articles dealing with this subject, the term writing itself is used to mean the same thing as composition.

In attempting to define creative writing, the same difficulty is encountered as in defining composition. Widely divergent views of the term tend to lead to ambiguity of meaning. Since this study is based partly on the premise that all composition is to some degree creative, the term creative writing will not be used in its most common sense, though it will be referred to in this sense in quoting the ideas and opinions of others. For the purposes of this study, no better terminology could be found than that of Alvina Burrows, who divides children's writing into two broad categories, with division based on purposes for writing. Writing which has as its broad purpose direct and definite communication, and
is objective in nature, is designated as \textit{practical} writing. Writing which is more subjective and emotional, and which serves artistic needs, is termed \textit{personal} writing \(2, \text{p. 2}\). These broad divisions are not inflexible, but they are useful in discussing and describing the writing of children.

Since this study proposes to serve as a practical and useful supplement to the teacher in building an effective composition program for the intermediate grades, the organization of the study is similar to that of an actual composition program. The first area to be considered is that of preparation for writing. In this section, needs and objectives are discussed, with the problem of motivation being given special treatment according to its importance to the topic. Following this, the actual writing of children is discussed, with suggested teaching procedures and topics for children's writing included. The question of evaluation is an extremely important one, as is publication, or what is done with children's writing once it has been completed. The final section is devoted to these closely related topics.
CHAPTER BIBLIOGRAPHY


CHAPTER II

REQUIREMENTS OF AN EFFECTIVE
COMPOSITION PROGRAM

In planning a composition program for intermediate
students, certain general assumptions should be made before
any statement of objectives can be formulated. By the time
children have completed the first three grades and enter
the upper elementary grades, they have usually gained some
measure of independence in reading, some degree of dictionary
skill, and they have at least been exposed to the skills of
handwriting. All these skills will vary widely as will skills
in other areas more closely connected with composition, such
as vocabulary, punctuation, and knowledge of grammar. Since
there will be such wide variance to contend with, all plans
must have an element of flexibility so that they can be
adapted to meet a variety of needs.

The Role of the Teacher

The problem of teacher qualities and attitudes cannot
be ignored. Perhaps it should be stated at the outset that
not all teachers can teach composition, and further, that
perhaps not all of them should try to do so. Much as children
need to be provided with opportunities to write, if a teacher
is unable to recognize the importance of content over form,
that teacher may do more harm than good. The basic obligation of the composition teacher is to deal with content. If, as often happens in the middle grades, attention centers on form, children's writing will become less spontaneous and more labored (10, p. 15). It would be less than realistic to pretend that such teachers do not exist; they do exist and will probably continue to mark compositions just as they have always done. However, since studies indicate that most elementary teachers lack training in this area, it is probably true that many teachers can and will improve their teaching of composition through increased awareness of techniques and procedures. The teacher who adheres to the principles of child-centered teaching is most ideally suited to composition instruction, because the composition program itself must be child-centered if it is to be successful.

The language arts program in most elementary schools assumes the responsibility for building effective communication skills. Ideally, reading, writing, listening, and speaking are the basic areas which should comprise the language program. Realistically, however, most elementary schools build a language arts curriculum around textbooks which, unfortunately, do not correspond to the areas mentioned. Instead, the teacher is supplied with English textbooks, spelling books, basal and supplementary reading materials, and handwriting booklets, none of which are particularly useful for teaching writing, speaking, or listening. Many of these
textbooks are repetitious, with the same material being presented in two or more books assigned to a grade level. It is little wonder that teachers are being admonished to build child-centered language programs, using texts only as they are needed. The unfortunate fact that most elementary teachers are not English specialists points to the likelihood that such curriculum building will not occur in most classrooms. However, an increasing number of publications are becoming available to teachers offering aid in making the transition from the textbook-based program to a student-centered program. Two such books are Moffett's A Student-Centered Language Arts Curriculum, Grades K-13: A Handbook for Teachers, and Maybury's Creative Writing for Juniors.

Moffett proposes "a way of teaching the native language that requires almost no textbooks or materials except reading selections and that, indeed, offers an alternative to the installation of a prepackaged curriculum" (7,p.2). Maybury speaks of teachers who do not really feel that they are teaching English unless they are using a textbook of some sort. In questioning the effectiveness of such teaching, he expresses the attitude that children have to learn the commonly acceptable forms of usage, but if these are taught as abstract entities, independent of meaningful content, "then surely it is as bad as learning French irregular verbs without ever being able to put together a sentence a Frenchman could understand" (6, p. 16). A careful reading and
consideration of opinions of this type should encourage the
teacher attempting to free herself from dependence on
textbooks.

The teacher must begin by studying her school situation
and her pupils, evaluating the needs and abilities of those
pupils, and then planning meaningful composition activities.
She must "be diagnostician, therapist, counselor, and critic
to each child" (5, p. 89). If a teacher informs herself by
reading widely, and if she knows her students and their
needs, she can expect to make progress. What she cannot and
should not hope for is a "prepackaged program that can be
served from books in daily doles" (7, p. 5). The teacher
working in composition must realize that the program, from
start to finish, will be uniquely her own. In the role of
diagnostician, she will have to devise methods of finding
the needs and abilities of her students. She will have to
set up ways of keeping records, and as schedule-maker it
will be up to her to find time for composition work. Time
will be an important element; time will demand more consider-
ation than it deserves, for it must be remembered that the
elementary school curriculum is a crowded one.

In the beginning it would be wise for the teacher to
be both practical and realistic. Many teachers have begun
a writing program with high hopes only to abandon it in the
face of repeated failure and lack of interest. Interest will
have to be built and then revived over and over again. The
teacher needs to remember that her students have already been exposed to the interest-deadening influence of the red pencils of their former teachers. Thus it is that in the beginning she must work very hard to gain the confidence of students. She will have to convince them that she will be as concerned with what they have to say as she is with how they have said it.

Though the task of actualizing the composition program in the classroom requires much of the individual teacher, it also requires the support and collaboration of the school system in which she works (7, p. 15). If the system is one which insists that teachers adhere closely to textbooks and courses of study, a child-centered composition program has little chance for success. If, however, the system encourages progress and innovation, teachers may feel free to leave the textbooks on the shelves and proceed to teach children more about language through actual use of language. A key to the success of a composition program may lie in this apparently simple act. Elementary language texts traditionally have stressed usage and the mechanics of language, professing to teach these through rules followed by drills. Studies have proved that such isolated teaching of correct usage has little carry-over into children's writing and may even have a detrimental effect on it. Christensen states that the teaching of grammar and usage in isolation "is not likely to have any bearing on writing unless
there is a teacher . . . to bring it to bear" (3, p. 125). It has often been recommended that grammar and usage be taught only as the need for it arises in the actual composition activities of children, but the accepted, traditional methods of language teaching are difficult to replace.

Needs

In earlier days, to convey ideas through speaking and listening was often sufficient, but in a democratic society which grows increasingly dependent upon the use of written communication, the ability to read and to write assumes ever-growing importance. It is not simply that reading and writing will make life more enjoyable and insure greater success, but that these skills have become basic needs of every person in our society. In view of the importance of written communication in the modern world, it seems hardly necessary to justify the teaching of composition in the elementary schools, and yet there is a great deal of evidence to support the statement that "written and spoken composition have suffered near atrophy in the elementary school since the advent of workbooks, practice sheets, and objective tests" (9, p. 10).

While a basic reason for the necessity of developing skill in written expression may be fulfillment of the needs of society, there are individual needs which are very important. These include the need for self-expression which
is strongly felt in childhood and will carry over into adulthood if it is encouraged and nurtured. The therapeutic value of self-expression through writing has been recognized by many experts in the field of children's writing. Burrows strongly emphasizes this aspect of writing, stating that through this medium many children "divulge secret yearnings and resentments they might never consciously betray" (2, p. 3). In addition, there are many practical uses for imaginative written expression, including its use as an outlet for a pupil's tensions and worries, as a means of solving discipline problems, reducing maladjustment, and allowing the timid the chance to express themselves (8, p. 256).

Other needs, more practical in nature, may be classed together as school-related needs. These needs are immediate, and their fulfillment or lack of it often has great bearing on the child's success or failure in school. As Walter Petty says, "Virtually every subject in the school curriculum provides a need for written records, reports, and tests" (8, p. 187). Each of these practical needs has importance, since as the child progresses into the intermediate grades, he is expected to do an increasing amount of written work. All too often this activity is mere busy work. For many years the stress on writing in the typical classroom has been on the development of clear, legible handwriting, with the skills of composition frequently ignored. Children practice handwriting; they copy from books and from
chalkboards, carefully filling in blanks or underlining correct answers. This is not composition. Depending on activities of this nature, children cannot be expected to develop fluency in writing. It is granted that these school-related needs must be met, and that as a result of these needs a certain amount of required written work must be done. But the interested, imaginative teacher can always find ways to lighten the load of written "work" while leaving ample time for the real business of composition to take place.

As children move into the middle grades, "the control of writing as a medium comes into its own. Prior to grades four and five, children's struggles with the mechanics of writing curtail their use of the art for spontaneous expression" (1, p. 15). Thus their need for self-expression can be more readily fulfilled at these ages than was possible earlier. This need for self-expression is a major factor around which a successful writing program can be built, but before this can be accomplished, the need itself must be thoroughly understood. Most children are naturally gregarious; many elementary teachers will vouch for this fact and for the fact that most children enjoy talking. They particularly enjoy the freedom of talking without restriction, of conversation just for fun. In this way, they can express themselves, some more fluently than others, of course, but most with at least some degree of enjoyment.
For children, talking requires the use of a language. If it is to be understood, talking requires the use of good diction and unconscious punctuation. If it is to be enjoyed by others, talking also requires the use of many words, of images used without recognizing them as such, and of imagination. If talking actually requires these skills and others, it would seem that the elementary school ought to teach talking. Instead, the elementary school usually assumes that the child knows how to talk and does not need extensive instruction in oral expression, but does not know how to write and does need instruction in written expression. Perhaps it would be wiser to recognize the fact that the processes which lead to oral expression are essentially the same as those which lead to written expression, using this knowledge in conjunction with the child's natural desire for self-expression as the foundation on which to build a composition program.

It must be remembered that the production of writing is considerably more difficult than that of speech, because writing "requires the child to do what does not come naturally" (4, p. 6). This difficulty can be traced in part to the need for acquiring the mechanical skills of written expression in the primary grades, but the problem does not usually carry over into the intermediate grades to any great degree, as has been noted earlier. At the intermediate age, the physical act of writing does not often present insurmountable problems,
and most children have at least a sketchy knowledge of the mechanics of sentence structure. Why then, the difficulty? A survey of research and current teaching practices indicates that a major reason is lack of teacher training which leads to lack of confidence in teaching, lack of honesty in purposes for writing, and lack of opportunities for a wide variety of writing experiences. Also at fault are poor practices in evaluation. If children are going to learn to write well, they need a teacher who is capable of guiding them through meaningful writing activities. They need to have honest and useful purposes for writing under many and varied circumstances. Finally, their writing needs to be evaluated and appreciated in terms that are meaningful to them.

Children in the intermediate grades are often faced with immediate needs for writing. Frequently these needs can be utilized as purposes for writing in order to make experiences more meaningful. For example, children of these age levels enjoy writing and receiving letters, though they may complain when asked to write one for an English class. The key problem here is purpose, and the remedy is quite simple. The child needs to have someone to whom he wants to write a letter, and then his letter must be mailed to that person. Only this actual use of writing can make it truly worthwhile from the child's viewpoint.
Children in the intermediate grades need to be recognized as individuals. They share a strong desire to have their work admired by others. The high degree of interest in activities such as Public School Week is strong evidence of this need. If there is to be any sort of display of children's work, each child wants to be represented. This is a need which will make the task of the composition teacher much easier if it is recognized and used skillfully. If a child suspects that his composition is going to read by no one but his teacher, he loses much of his incentive to write well. Later, if his effort at composition is returned covered with red marks of criticism, a great deal more of his incentive and enthusiasm will be lost. Instead of writing for the teacher's red pencil, the child needs to know that this work will be enjoyed by others, and that what he has to say has some value other than as an exercise in writing over until it is correct.

Objectives

Consideration of the needs of children in the intermediate grades, both extrinsic and intrinsic, necessarily precedes statement of objectives for the composition program. Clearly, this is as it should be; if the curriculum is to be child-centered, it must strive to fill the needs of each child. Since the needs of children originate from sources both within and without, the objectives stated follow this broad division. Those objectives which are based on needs arising from within
each child are grouped together; those which come from sources outside the child are in a separate group. In addition, a list of teacher-centered objectives is included in recognition of the great importance of teaching attitudes and practices.

Formally stated, these are the objectives which a well-planned, carefully executed composition program should attempt to meet.

Objectives for Meeting Intrinsic Needs

1. To provide for the student's own use of language rather than increasing his knowledge about it
2. To provide frequent opportunity for self-expression through writing
3. To serve as a means for the achievement of self-discovery and recognition of self as an individual of worth and value
4. To provide an effective and useful outlet for the emotions of the child
5. To provide for growth in imaginative ability and in respect for the value of ideas, both one's own and those of others
6. To provide for growth in the ability to adjust to one's environment and to operate effectively whenever written expression is needed.

Objectives for Meeting Extrinsic Needs

1. To develop thinking skills basic to the expression of ideas in writing
2. To develop awareness of different types of writing and situations which call for each type

3. To increase awareness of language as it is used in various forms from words through sentences and sentence patterns to paragraphs, and finally to paragraphs in series and compositions in the traditional sense of the word

4. To learn to organize ideas effectively before writing and to reorganize where necessary

5. To develop the ability to find errors and weaknesses in one's own writing and that of others

6. To develop the mechanical skills of composition (handwriting, usage, spelling, punctuation) in practical, meaningful situations rather than through repetitious drill

Teacher-centered Objectives

1. To individualize instruction to the highest degree possible

2. To maintain a positive attitude at all times, emphasizing what is good in each student's writing while helping each child overcome difficulties

3. To lead each student toward honesty in his own writing by providing honest purposes for writing and by helping each child realize the value of what he writes

4. To provide frequent opportunities for various types of writing

5. To remove the pressure for correctness from precedence over content
6. To provide sufficient experiences prior to writing so that each child will have something to write

7. To provide for each student an ongoing record of his writing so that he and his teachers can observe his progress

Implementation

Following the establishment of a basis for teaching composition in the intermediate grades through recognition of needs and statement of objectives, there arises the problem of implementation. It is a mistake to assume that there is one single procedure which will teach all children to write better; there is no magic formula in existence which can be applied in every classroom (8, p. 215). It is further in error to assume that composition skills can be acquired through extensive reading. Francis Christensen believes that "the teacher who argues that writing can be learned by osmosis [from reading literature] is arguing himself out of a job" (3, p. 125). The teacher must serve as the instrument for implementation.

Writing improvement occurs as a result of structured practice, skillfully planned and guided. Writing assignments based on standard topics such as summer vacations, or on vague instructions to write about anything the student chooses seldom turn out well (7, p. 231). The factor which is lacking in these situations is background for writing. Children need to know a great deal in order to write little. They must
observe, analyze, experiment, read, talk, and finally, think before they write (1, p. 18). Through such experiences children will reach a point of eagerness to write which is so vitally necessary to success in the composition program.

Motivation

In writing, perhaps more than in any other school task, a child's motivation is of utmost importance (1, p. 18). Some activities in composition build interest and others stifle it. Practices which have proved to be either ineffective or detrimental to writing progress include stressing form over content, failing to provide adequate background for writing, using writing as a form of punishment, and making structured, restrictive writing assignments. This is, of course, only a partial list, but it is to be hoped that as teachers become better qualified to teach composition these and other such practices will be discarded.

Children who profess to hate composition because they have nothing to say may be working with a teacher who has not yet found a way to get them started (8, p. 257). Failure to provide adequate background and motivation for writing will inevitably lead to failure of the composition program as a whole. Fortunately, this is one of the easiest problems to solve. There are hundreds of ways to get children started writing available to the interested teacher.

The deplorable practice of using writing as a form of punishment is probably more widespread than research indicates.
The obvious faults of such a practice should have effected its demise long ago, but unfortunately there are still teachers who force recalcitrant students to write lines or pages as payment for misbehavior. Such practices must be eliminated before real progress can occur. The contemporary opposite of using writing for punishment is the method of helping children settle differences of opinion through the use of written expression. This must be accomplished skillfully under positive conditions fostered by a sincere desire to arrive at understanding, but it can be very effective. If such experiences are handled well, children can reap twofold benefits. They can learn to express and share their ideas and opinions in written form, and they can arrive at a deeper understanding of each other.

Another type of detrimental practice, using restrictive and highly-structured assignments, is contrary to all that is good in composition teaching. On the surface it may seem desirable to assign children to write sentences or stories using spelling word lists or vocabulary lists, but such an assignment is in basic contradiction to the goals of self-expression. The child should be learning to choose words suitable to express his own thoughts, not thoughts suitable to the use of particular words. A key to the whole question of motivation and success or failure in a composition program is the provision of honest and worthwhile purposes for writing. Purposes are described as worthwhile if they are not artificial,
contrived, or arbitrarily chosen by the teacher. Honest purposes grow out of children's needs and their recognition of those needs. There are, of course, other practices which further deter the development of children's ability in written expression, but those discussed are the most detrimental and most in need of being eliminated.

Moving from the negative to the positive aspect of motivation, there are literally hundreds of ways to foster good writing. These vary in scope and importance from minor suggestions for composition topics to broad areas in need of general attention. Since motivation is a problem that each teacher will have to deal with in her own way, this study has been restricted to discussion of those broad areas of most importance, while maintaining strong emphasis on motivation throughout the sections on teaching procedures.

The writing teacher must not assume that all children are naturally eager to write. This may be true in the primary grades, but this eagerness is usually lost by the time the child is in the intermediate grades. One scholar states that "in primary grades writing is a new experience and children love to write, but the newness soon wears off. As children get older their writing is apt to become more inhibited and more stereotyped" (8, p. 230). What causes this stifled eagerness? The reasons are simple: too many red marks of criticism with no accompanying encouragement, lack of real purpose for and use of writing efforts, and too
much written work expected each day, with the child being forced to copy over, aiming for perfection. It is clear that a major task of the composition teacher will be to rebuild this lost enthusiasm. This can be accomplished by building background for writing, arousing interest, using praise instead of criticism, and evaluating positively rather than negatively. Through these methods confidence can be built, ability can be improved, and children can regain the lost desire to write.

Since the basic purpose of this study is to serve as a practical and useful guide to the language arts teacher in building an effective composition program for students in the intermediate grades, the discussions of needs of children, objectives of the program, and motivation for writing have been generally rather than specifically treated, so that they might be applicable to the widest variety of situations possible. It is recognized that the intermediate child comes in many varieties, and that each child must be challenged to improve his writing. It is also recognized that teaching arrangements in these grades vary, with both self-contained and departmentalized situations likely to occur. For these reasons, the suggested teaching procedures included in this study are those which are considered general enough for use in the majority of intermediate classrooms.


CHAPTER III
NEW ACTIVITIES FOR INITIATING
THE PROGRAM

Because of the wide variety of materials and textbooks in use in intermediate language programs, there is no attempt in this study to follow a particular textbook series. Instead, the proposed composition program as presented is intended to be useful as a supplement to any language text in use, and the activities and experiences described are adaptable to various teaching situations as needed. They need not be followed in any rigid order. Only one specific recommendation is made and that is in regard to activities for beginning the program. Certain experiences should be used in the early stages of the program in order to build a firm writing foundation based on confidence and experience. Once the program has been initiated, subsequent lessons can be planned to suit the needs of each particular class.

The teacher will need to begin her composition program by determining specific student needs and abilities. A simple diagnostic test can be devised to gather information on levels of achievement. This type of test is best made by the teacher herself, since only she will know the particular areas in which she needs information. In making up the test, several factors should be considered. First,
both teacher and students should be aware of the purpose of diagnosis, which is to gather information for planning a more effective language study program. By dictating a series of sentences and having the students write what they hear, the teacher can assess levels of achievement in capitalization, punctuation, spelling, and handwriting. Simple sentences requiring students to mark correct forms can indicate areas of strength or weakness in usage. The use of a series of short, choppy sentences with directions to students to make the sentences sound better, if they can, should indicate ability to combine ideas effectively. Instructions to write three or four sentences on a given topic can reveal basic information on composition skill if the resulting sentences are analyzed carefully in terms of interest, continuity, and clarity.

Beginning activities must be so structured that the students can write readily and without fear of being wrong. In the early stages of a composition program each activity should include a stimulation period in which teacher and students are closely involved in building background for writing, and a brief period (about fifteen minutes) of concentrated effort on the part of the children (2, p. 21). It is sometimes argued that freedom of choice is of utmost importance in children's writing, but to present students with too much freedom and too many choices in the early stages of a writing program can be disastrous. It is better
to have an entire group involved with the same theme or activity, writing on the same subject. Children can "be allowed and indeed encouraged to write in any way they please—in prose or verse, directly on the subject or on some extension of it" (2, p. 21). But to offer a lesson built on a common writing experience and then to tell students they can write about anything they like is both nonsensical and confusing. The consensus of opinion is that once writing has become established in the classroom as an opportunity rather than a chore, then choices can safely be offered.

The descriptions of composition lessons included in this study are intended to be as complete as possible. Each lesson discussion consists mainly of a description of the activity. In addition, each discussion may also have suggestions for alternatives or extensions of the lesson and comments about problems that might occur. Within this framework, the following activities are recommended for use in the very early stages of the composition program.

The "Personal" Notebook

The keeping of a "personal" notebook is an activity ideally suited for use early in the composition program. Its basic purpose is to provide students with regular opportunities for writing without restrictions, giving them "relaxed practice" (3, p. 247). The notebook itself can be some type of permanent folder or spiral notebook. In this activity
the teacher should stress to students the importance of writing regularly. Once the notebook has been started, there should be a specified time set aside for writing in it. This may be at the beginning of the language period or at any time teachers and students feel is best. However, the time should be specified, and students should be expected to write.

At first, daily entries should be required, with students being instructed to think about each day's events and write about what they consider most important. As each student gains confidence and interest in writing, he should be "free to develop his own writing style, to organize his daily entry as he chooses, and to decorate the covers and the pages as he wishes" (2, p. 270). There should be a minimum of ground rules in this activity, with a clear understanding between teacher and students that the notebooks are personal and therefore private, to be shared between teacher and student only. The teacher should make no corrections in spelling, grammar, punctuation, or content (4, p. 1081). The basic idea is for the teacher to accept everything the children write at this stage, thus encouraging their desire to communicate in writing.

The personal notebook should not be maintained as a daily activity longer than a few weeks, but if students are interested enough, the project may be maintained on an irregular basis indefinitely. Through this activity the
teacher can accomplish two important goals: she can prove to her students that what they write will be accepted as it is written, and she can offer them the encouragement of knowing that she is reading and enjoying what they have written. In addition, the private notebook can serve as a storehouse of accumulated observation and experience from which the student can draw materials to enrich his later writing (5, p. 100).

Unfinished Statements

Very early in the school year, the activity of completing unfinished statements can be valuable to teachers and students alike. The teacher provides a series of about twenty open-ended statements on a mimeographed sheet for each student. Students are instructed to finish each sentence, with the clear understanding that the teacher is interested in what they have to say, and that they should write as clearly as possible, but that spelling and punctuation are not to be worried about at this time.

Sentence beginnings such as "I wish . . .," "No one ever . . .," "If I could . . .," or "School is . . .," can be used. If the teacher wants to use more structured sentences, she can simply provide more of a beginning. For example, instead of "I wish . . .," the sentence could begin "I wish I could . . .," or "I wish someone would ask me to . . ."

This activity will usually require about thirty minutes,
including time for introduction and the actual work of the children. Three aspects of the activity are very important to its success: the statements must be on individual sheets, as attempts to do this orally result in confusion and copying of ideas; the teacher must assure students that their responses will be kept confidential if they wish them to be; and the entire activity should be done in the classroom. Students in the intermediate grades often have such a strong desire for group conformity that there will be too much comparison of responses resulting in uniformity of answers if students are allowed to do this outside class.

What can this activity do for the teacher? Primarily, the responses of the children can give her a quick, but penetrating insight into many student personalities in a short time. Children will often express very private feelings in a writing experience of this nature, feelings that they would not be likely to express in any other way. In addition to providing insight into student personalities and problems, this activity can also provide the teacher with valuable diagnostic information. From a thorough study of student responses, information can be obtained on levels of achievement in putting thoughts down in written form.

Sensory Activities Relating to Thinking and Writing

Having established positive attitudes toward writing through the preceding activities, the teacher can now begin
a series of experiences designed to focus on the often-ignored phase of thinking as it relates to writing. Good composition units begin early with the observation and classification of experience (5, p. 105). In these activities each child will use his thinking ability to interpret information he has gathered through his senses, expressing this information in written form for permanency. Again it should be stressed that throughout these activities, as indeed in all of children's writing, clarity of expression takes precedence over correctness of form. Maybury's composition program is based on the belief that sensory activities are vital to the writing program, since the more sharply the senses are developed, the more a child is likely to take in, thus giving him more to think, write, and talk about (2, p. 23). The senses concentrated on in the following lessons are touch, sound, and sight.

Most of these sensory activities need to be done as individual exercises rather than group efforts, particularly in the writing stage. It is very important that each child learn to rely on his own mind, his own thinking, and his own word supply to express in writing what he is taking in through his senses. Admittedly, this will be a task of varying difficulty; however, if children are not guided toward independence of expression in the beginning, they may not make much progress in writing at all. Among groups of intermediate children there is a definite tendency to
rely on the thinking and expression of a few of the more outspoken members of the group, a tendency which must be discouraged if individuals are to make progress. It seems sensible to insist that each student be encouraged to develop his own skill in expression to some degree before placing him in group situations where he may or may not perform. Certainly, many writing situations require the use of groups, but in these early stages it is best to get each child working on his own.

A word of caution in regard to the sensory activities seems appropriate. The teacher must be aware that not all children will be able to express themselves without a great deal of help. For this reason, a certain amount of general discussion should precede each activity, with the talking involving as many children as possible. However, the teacher should take care that these discussions remain general, leaving each individual to provide the specifics on his own. Too much leading in a preliminary discussion will result in parroted responses during the experiences.

The Sense of Touch

An activity allowing the children to use only the sense of touch is a good way to begin this series of experiences. By removing the other senses, one narrows the focus, making the initial task of expression of sensory response easier. In preparation for the experience, the teacher must gather several items of interesting shapes. She will have to
decide whether she wants to use large paper bags or blindfolds. Since the activity involves the entire class in doing the same thing at once, perhaps both bags and blindfolds should be provided. Other materials needed will be a supply of objects, probably one object for each pair of children. The teacher should collect these objects with the thought in mind that children will be feeling them without looking at them while searching for words to describe them. Thus the objects should not be easily identifiable, for the visual image of a familiar object will negate the reliance on one sense which is a basic part of the activity. Suggestions for inclusion are a rotary eggbeater, a child's stuffed toy, measuring spoons on a ring, jacks, or any other small objects without sharp edges.

The lesson can be introduced by blindfolding a student volunteer who then seeks to describe an object that his classmates can see. As he describes the object, his exact words are recorded on the board for all to see, thus involving all the students in both experiences, feeling and recording. Such phrases as "smooth and round," "parts that turn," and "flat on one side," will indicate to the children that they will be recording their impressions in words and phrases, and not necessarily in sentences. Following this introduction, the teacher can quickly demonstrate how to use the paper bag without looking inside. Each student is then given an object to describe. Those using paper bags work
singly; students using blindfolds will have to work in pairs, with one feeling while the other records his impressions exactly as stated. The recording portion of the activity should take perhaps five to ten minutes, with children writing down everything their sense of touch tells them in as much detail as possible. They do not look at their objects at this time.

After writing is completed, the objects are collected and assembled on a large table. Each student first attempts to identify the object he described, using his written record for help. Students may help each other if they wish to, for the identification of every object is not the point of the lesson at all. Rather it is the experience of the child in expressing his sensory impression and then using these expressions in a tangible way. Some children will be able to identify their object and others will not; this should not be worried about at this time, although the teacher may make private note of those children who have the most difficulty performing in an experience of this type.

From this phase, the lesson can move in any one of several directions. Students can work in groups trying to identify the various objects by reading each other's records. If the teacher prefers a more structured atmosphere, the entire group might listen to several descriptions as individuals try to pick out the correct objects. It is important for the class to maintain awareness that the basic
purpose of this activity is not to match every object with
a correct description, but instead to give children experience
in writing based on sensory reactions (3, pp. 134-135).

The Sense of Sound

Activities involving children in recording what they
hear can be as simple or as elaborate as the teacher wishes
them to be. At first the entire class can sit quietly listen-
ing until specific sounds can be identified. As a child
identifies a sound he should put it into his own words, which
the teacher records on the board. Sounds such as "someone
walking," "a big truck going by," or "someone coughing," will
probably be offered. These can be enhanced by the teacher's
skillful use of questions asking for more specific description,
resulting in such responses as "someone coughing softly by the
door," or "someone walking in high heels upstairs." Focus on
sound alone can result in increased appreciation for the other
senses when all are used to record impressions.

Following this group experience, a listening session
based on taped episodes is effective, but it is important to
remember that intermediate children will need the experience
of working with the group first. Prior to class, the teacher
might make a tape recording presenting a short and simple
sequence such as someone opening a refrigerator, taking out
a cold drink, removing the cap, putting ice in a glass, and
pouring the drink over the ice. In an exercise similar to
this, Moffett uses the terms "short form" and "take notes"
to mean to children that they are to write appropriate words and phrases only, that no sentences are needed, and that they are not to worry about correct punctuation and spelling (3, p. 130). Moffett stresses to children the importance of making accurate guesses about what they are hearing.

These experiences with recording sounds should usually take about fifteen minutes in the classroom. Each experience should end with children sharing in some way the material they have written. A meaningful homework assignment can be made by instructing children to sit for about five minutes with pad and pencil at home, attempting to record in short form the various sounds they hear. These records can be shared and discussed in class later.

From this beginning the teacher can go on to longer, more detailed recordings for students to work with. Some students might wish to make recordings of their own. The value of these lessons lies in the experience of observing and classifying sensory impression in written form.

The Sense of Sight

The series of recording sensory experiences began with the narrowed focus on one sense only—the sense of touch. Moving from the sense of sound to sight broadens the focus to include a much wider variety of images to be recorded. The purpose is to move the children along a structured line of
experiences, each new experience becoming a bit less structured as each child gains confidence in his ability to record his impressions. The basic pattern of all these sensory recording lessons follows the order of children sharing a group experience, then writing individual impressions, and finally, sharing and discussing these impressions to learn from each other.

The simplest way to get children to write down what they see is to put a large, colorful picture before them, instructing them to describe it. However, the results of such an activity with intermediate children who have not done a great deal of writing will be anything but gratifying. It is much better to plan an activity that will involve the students and capture their interest. One such lesson requires the use of an episode, planned and arranged in advance, occurring in the classroom, and recorded by the children. It requires two separate time periods. In the first phase, the teacher reminds the children about taking notes and using short forms. She then instructs them to record her movements as she performs several acts such as walking across the room, opening a window, moving a desk, touching a student on the shoulder, and returning to her desk. A composite record of her movements should be recorded on the board, accompanied by discussion of such points as why short forms are needed and why terms used must be specific in order to have accurate description.
In the second phase of this experience, by previous arrangement, some outside person, preferably one unknown to the students, comes into the room. No instructions prior to this portion of the experience should be given, except that students need to have writing materials ready. As students observe, the person performs several definite acts and then leaves the room. These acts might include taking something out of the teacher's desk, or removing some object from a table. As soon as the person leaves, each student should be instructed to write exactly what he saw as quickly and as accurately as he can, taking about five minutes. The third phase should follow immediately, with children sharing and discussing what they recorded. A composite description of the person and his actions should be put on the board, giving further practice in using the short form effectively. When the description has been completed, the person should return to the room so that students can test the accuracy of their descriptions.

In this activity the teacher can take advantage of the opportunity to stress the order of events as they occurred, a concept which often gives intermediate students difficulty. They can see from differences in individual records that each person sees an event in his own way, and that accuracy is not easy to achieve.

Having experienced this series of activities in recording sensory reactions, students should begin developing more
confidence when faced with blank paper and instructions to write. While they will continue to need structured experiences, stimulation, and guidance, they should have achieved some measure of success in expressing themselves in writing. Student attitudes toward writing should have improved if these initial lessons have been carried out in a positive atmosphere, and students should no longer regard writing with dread. From this beginning the teacher should plan the composition program to fit into her overall language program, using the suggested activities for practical and personal writing in whatever order and at whatever time seems most appropriate, always keeping in mind that composition instruction should become an integral part of the language program.
CHAPTER BIBLIOGRAPHY


CHAPTER IV

NEW APPROACHES TO OLD ACTIVITIES

Intermediate students are frequently required to do composition work such as writing letters, stories, book reports, and reference papers. However, all too often teachers have involved themselves in these activities only to the extent of assigning a title and telling the children to get on with it (4, p. 172). While teaching, or lack of teaching, of this type can no longer be accepted, many of these timeworn composition activities can still be quite useful. The key to their continued usefulness lies in the employment of new approaches, new techniques, and most important, new enthusiasm on the part of the teacher. Most of the activities in this section are based on the use of practical writing, which has earlier been defined as that writing which has as its broad purpose direct and definite communication.

Writing Letters

Children have traditionally been expected to write letters in school. Textbooks usually supply a stilted model with the parts of the letter appropriately marked; students imitate the model and memorize the parts, as teachers unconsciously steer them to word their letters in the orthodox way (1, p. 393). Why not change these conditions by
stimulating them to write creative letters? Applegate defines a creative letter as one that is so uniquely the
writer that it makes the reader feel what the writer feels, and see what the writer sees (2, p. 101). This result
cannot be achieved through a textbook lesson requiring all the children to write their letters at the same time.

Moffett recommends that children be given the option of writing letters instead of entries in the personal notebook
during the early stages of the composition program (5, p. 247). The teacher might keep writing materials and stamps available
so that children could write real letters to be mailed as soon as they are written, instead of being handed in to the teacher. As an opportunity rather than a chore, letter-writing can become more meaningful and enjoyable.

Writing Directions

Most intermediate children will have had extensive experience in following directions, and it is likely that for many these experiences will have been unpleasant. They may have received lower scores on daily work and tests for failure to follow directions, or they may have exhibited weaknesses in this area on achievement tests. The composition program might serve a dual purpose in this area by approaching the activity in reverse order. Instead of reading directions and then writing or otherwise responding to them, children might be given experience in writing directions themselves. The duality of purpose lies in the
possibility for learning in two areas—written expression and interpreting directions.

The first phase of the experience requires planning to the extent that arrangements should be made for a person to come into the classroom and give a simple demonstration. An art teacher might come in and show the students how to cut and paste paper to make a paper chain, or a student from another class could show how to prepare an aquarium for fish. The demonstration should be fairly slow and simple, with the students observing and attempting to record each step in short form. This phase of the lesson should end with students discussing what they have written, trying to account for differences in the records made. This recording of steps taken in a given activity is difficult for intermediate students, and the activity may need to be repeated before the teacher feels satisfied that students are ready for the second phase.

In the second phase each student is required to think of something he knows how to make from common materials. He writes the directions as clearly as he can and exchanges them with a classmate. All follow the directions as homework, noting down any problems or questions about the directions, and bringing to school what they have made. Direction-writer and direction-follower then meet together to discuss the instructions and to analyze the results. An activity of this type gives students practice which is a part of their
real world, and not a textbook-based exercise far removed from their interests. They also gain valuable experience in communicating with each other both verbally and through writing.

An additional activity which involves writing and following directions requires the cooperation of an art teacher. Children are asked to paint or draw a picture, and then to write detailed directions for painting a picture just like theirs. These instructions are then given to students in another art class who are told to follow the directions, painting or drawing accordingly. The final step is to bring both direction-writer and direction-reader together to compare paintings, discuss the directions, and locate any problems with communication.

Writing directions for getting from one place to another is a useful assignment that can be very enjoyable. If a school campus is large enough, this activity may be carried out as an in-school activity. It is just as suitable for students to use road maps, or to give directions for getting around in their own neighborhoods. The important thing to remember is that communication is the basic purpose of writing directions. Thus, the direction-writer must have some feedback on his work, and these activities provide just that.
Reporting Events

Intermediate students enjoy telling others about their experiences, a characteristic that may be used to advantage in the composition program. Although this activity is not adaptable as a regular classroom experience, it is worthy of mention because of its high interest level. Whenever a teacher becomes aware of differences or disagreements among students, she can enlist the aid of all involved students in settling the problem. Each student is asked to write in detail his version of the event, with no preliminary discussion and no collaboration. The records of events are then read aloud and compared, with differences and similarities noted on the board. The use of writing instead of discussion removes the strong tendency toward loud argument usually connected with disagreements among students. A valuable follow-up to this activity might be a discussion of the newspaper, and the reporter's responsibility to present a clear version of events. This discussion could serve as a springboard to the publication of a school or class newspaper. It might also involve other media such as television and radio reporting of the news.

The Newspaper

It is not uncommon for elementary teachers to avoid the newspaper as a class activity because of the additional work involved. However, there are many ways to "publish" a newspaper, and with several of these methods the work can be
done by students, as it should be. Applegate has pointed out that "from the child's point of view, a school newspaper is fun if it is not too teacher-dominated" (1, p. 328). One method of producing a paper is to put it on a bulletin board, thus making it readily available to all without the extra work and expense of printing copies for everyone.

Studying advertisements in conjunction with producing a newspaper can provide valuable experiences for children in distinguishing between fact and opinion, truth and exaggeration. Each child could study one or more advertisements in newspapers, magazines, or on television, bringing pertinent information to class for discussion. Following this, students could try writing their own advertisements, attempting to "sell" a favorite book, a pet, or a hobby.

If a class wishes to produce a printed newspaper, interested parents or high school students might be enlisted as typists. A project of this type is usually worth the extra effort involved, because it provides "live language work, giving purpose to language classes, and affording a variety of language experiences" (1, p. 328).

Book Reports and References Papers

Among numerous discussions of book reports in current publications on children's writing, Corbin expresses the consensus of opinion on the subject in his statement that the requirement of written book reports teaches children
"to avoid books as they would the plague" (3, p. 56). And yet one can hardly refute Moffett's assertion that "the most common kind of writing done in most elementary schools today—and the most time-consuming—is reporting on books one has read" (5, p. 253). Moffett expresses a widespread opinion among scholars interested in children's writing in recommending that the assignment of book reports be dropped entirely.

Perhaps a better solution is one suggested by Applegate, who lists dozens of ways to make book reporting imaginative and fun (2, pp. 348-349). If teachers are going to continue to assign written book reports, and it seems likely that they are, perhaps the use of imagination and variety in making the assignments might remove some of the tedium of the task. Children might be asked to write an advertisement attempting to sell the book they have read, as suggested in the newspaper activity. A letter to the author of the book is a challenging assignment, as is the task of writing a different ending to the book. These are just a few of the dozens of ways to help children enjoy writing book reports. For additional suggestions, Applegate's *Easy in English* is recommended.

The assignment of reference papers is a common one in the intermediate grades. Moffett expresses disapproval of the reference paper for elementary students, describing it as a "collection of information pieced together from
reference books," and stating that "the task of collating information from encyclopedias, newspapers, magazines, and other sources openly invites plagiarism" (5, pp. 253-254). In recognition of these facts, teachers ought to consider the values, if any, of such papers, as compared with the faults, before deciding to use this type of writing assignment. It would seem much more sensible to devise other methods of checking on a student's reading, leaving his writing experiences free of the tedium and drudgery so long connected with the book report and the reference paper.
CHAPTER BIBLIOGRAPHY


CHAPTER V

CREATIVE APPROACHES TO PERSONAL WRITING

The division of children's writing into two broad areas, practical and personal, is a useful one. While engaged in practical writing, the child is primarily concerned with his purpose for writing, which is usually the direct and definite communication of information. On the other hand, personal writing appeals to the child's artistic nature, offering him an avenue for the expression of feelings and ideas uniquely his own. As in all phases of the writing program, personal writing demands a high degree of teacher involvement with students. Activities must be carefully planned and executed, since with personal writing it is the experience of writing itself that is foremost in importance.

Values of Personal Writing

While most teachers today recognize the increasing importance of teaching composition skills in the elementary school, many of these same teachers still regard personal writing as an activity for a Friday afternoon, or as an experience to be offered only to the advanced or accelerated student. Awareness of the values of personal writing might convince many of these teachers to include it as part of their regular language programs for all students, not just
the gifted. An extensive list of the values of personal writing is found in Petty's book *Slithery Snakes and Other Aids to Children's Writing*. The most important values are listed as follows: (1) Children engaged in creative writing are likely to be using more of their mental capabilities than they do for many other kinds of school activities, (2) Creative writing has the virtue of cutting across ability levels, (3) Vocabulary is considerably developed as ideas are expressed and exchanged, and (4) Creative writing causes children to be more observant (6, pp. 6-7). Certainly these values are important as the needs of children are considered, but possibly the most valuable aspect of all is the element of enjoyment. When children are engaged in an enjoyable activity in which each can perform at his own level of ability, these are the most positive conditions for learning it is possible to achieve.

The therapeutic value of personal writing should not be ignored. Pryor coined the term "graphotherapy" for the practice of using the personal writing of children to help identify and solve their problems (7, p. 511). Teachers would be well-advised to use great caution in this area; children should never be required to write about themselves. It is unwise deliberately to try to promote writing which is therapeutic. Even though a teacher is expected to know something about child psychology, no one will approve of a
teacher who attempts to play the amateur psychiatrist (3, p. 166). At best a wise teacher can offer only sympathy and understanding. These cautions should not be allowed to discourage the use of personal writing as an outlet for children's pent-up feelings. Often a teacher gets valuable insight into a child's personality through this release (6, p. 7).

Effective Personal Writing Situations

There are literally hundreds of ways to stimulate personal writing. The raw material is there within the child, whose feelings, ideas, and fantasies are just waiting to be expressed. But again a word of warning is in order. The teacher must not make the mistake of assuming that children will write spontaneously; it is the teacher's job to create the opportunities for writing, the positive atmosphere so vital to self-expression, and the accepting attitude so necessary for self-esteem.

In a study of this type there is no purpose to be served by including extensive lists of ideas for personal writing experiences; the interested teacher can find these for herself as the need arises. Instead, several suggestions with the important characteristics of high interest level and general application are discussed in depth. While these suggestions can serve as the basis for an effective personal writing program, it is strongly recommended that those books included in the chapter bibliography be consulted for
additional ideas in planning the individual composition program. Every class will have specific needs, and these can be filled only by the teacher who knows her class well.

There are three vital phases in each activity for personal writing. The first phase is stimulation, the second phase is the actual writing, and the third phase is evaluation and publication. Publication is considered to be of such importance that a section of the study has been devoted to its discussion. It should suffice at this point to state that publication refers to whatever is done with children's writing once it has been completed.

Stimulation is perhaps the most difficult stage. It has already been stated that children will not write if they have nothing to say, and it is through stimulation that this problem can be overcome. Children without ideas must be given ideas. Children with ideas must be given opportunities to bring them to the conscious level. This can be done by insuring that each writing experience is preceded by a stimulation period, and that the stimulation period has a definite focus. This focus may be simply a discussion or an interchange of ideas from pupil to pupil. Other possibilities for focus are the use of a picture or pictures, the reading of a poem or an excerpt from a book, or running a film without sound (1, p. 28).

During the period of actual writing the teacher should be available to help students who may be having difficulty.
A very effective method of stimulation is for the teacher to write as the children do, sharing her work with them in the publication activity (1, p. 21). Equally effective is the practice of simply being in circulation around the room as children write, spotting a frown that means a student is in need of a word of encouragement, or responding quickly to requests for help. The personal writing lesson is "a lesson in which the teacher is actively participating" (3, p. 26), and not "a period in which children do something imposingly called 'composition' while the teacher marks arithmetic papers" (3, p. 9).

As the children write, the teacher can remind them that in personal writing the purpose is to write as fast as possible, getting ideas down on paper and not stopping to worry about spelling and punctuation at this point. These and other improvements can be made later as the children ready their material for publication.

The teacher who concentrates on practical writing to the exclusion of personal writing will miss the pleasure of seeing her students truly enjoy writing. The following activities are presented as suggestions for use in establishing a program of personal writing. Each activity should require about one class period, but time should be relatively unimportant. The activities can be used in the order in which they are presented, or they may be rearranged to suit the needs of a particular class.
Writing about Pictures

The use of pictures to stimulate writing is very appropriate early in the program, since a picture gives the students something tangible on which to focus. The activity consists of much more than just putting a pretty picture in front of the class and telling the students to write about it. The stimulus must be in the picture itself. It may be as unusual as a scene used in a magazine advertisement of a camel standing on a city street. Children could use one of several approaches to this picture. They might offer imaginative explanations for the camel's presence, or they might put themselves into the scene, creating an interesting episode. Children might also bring favorite pictures from home, exchange them, and choose one to write about (4, p. 232).

Collecting Words

Elementary language textbooks have for years recommended that students keep personal word lists, an activity which most children abhor. There are many pleasant and interesting activities with words which avoid the drudgery of the personal word list assigned by the teacher. An effective lesson can be built around the idea of collecting words in categories--for example, words for short, fat things, and words for long, thin things. Warm words, cold words, rough words, and smooth words can be collected. The categories should suit the interests of the children, and these should be put in some permanent form, as in a booklet made as a
class project, or on a bulletin board. As the collections are made, the words should be discussed, illustrated, and dramatized to give students greater opportunity to make them part of their individual vocabularies. What is valuable in this activity is that the children are considering words as interesting things in themselves, and therefore worth collecting (3, p. 135).

Word collections may be expanded into an activity in which children search for words to fit a particular frame, as in the sentence, "He went down the street." The students would collect words to replace went, and in so doing they might learn a great deal about the characteristics of verbs. It is not unreasonable to expect that there will be some carry-over into individual writing from experiences of this type. Since words are so vitally important to the success of any writing activity, the making of a collection of words might become a part of almost every writing lesson, particularly with young, inexperienced writers.

**Describing a Feeling**

A series of basic lessons in composition is available from Northwestern University's Curriculum Center. Each of these lessons is based on a selection from literature, a mimeographed copy of which is given each child. After the selection has been read, both silently and aloud, the teacher leads a carefully planned discussion, guiding students
through skillful questioning toward those points which are considered important to the development of the lesson. For example, in a lesson describing a feeling, the passage selected is from E. B. White's *Charlotte's Web*, in which the character Wilbur the pig describes his new friend, Charlotte, a spider. Teacher-guided discussion brings out the unique words and phrases used in the descriptive passage, moving on to the children's own experiences with making new friends through such questions as "How did you feel when you met someone new?" (5, p. 21). In this particular series of lessons the teacher concentrated on producing group compositions, because she was working with children who were both educationally disadvantaged and inexperienced in writing. Each student would offer his ideas for inclusion, and all ideas would eventually be organized into a composition pleasing to all the children. The group composition is useful in many situations, but individual work may be expected to develop out of an experience of this type, also. The use of a passage from literature provides that focus that is so necessary for stimulation in the act of composing.

**Instant Reactions**

An activity calling for children to write quickly their first reaction to various stimuli is a good way to get them writing when nothing else seems to be working. This activity involves the entire class at once, and they should have writing materials ready before the lesson is introduced.
There need be no elaborate introduction. The teacher should prepare for the lesson by bringing to class objects, pictures, or other stimuli which are sure to get instant emotional reaction from students. Margaret Langdon suggested an imaginary spider (2, p. 9). Why not a real spider in a glass jar, or a huge paper spider with pipe-cleaner legs that seem to move by themselves? The objective is to get the stimulus before the children, instructing them to write quickly just what they feel when the spider is put before them.

The teacher should move quickly to the next step, asking them to write three words describing the spider, and in the final step they are to write a sentence about the spider. Since spontaneity is the object, these written reactions should not be thought over and corrected at this point, but they should be shared and discussed. Children should never be deprived of the opportunity to share their writing with their classmates. In this activity the teacher can use one object or several, depending on the time available and the reactions of the class.

Writing Memories of Literature

Basing writing lessons on children's experiences with literature can be an invaluable way to stimulate them to write about what they have read. Such a lesson must have none of the dullness of the usual book report; there must be interest and involvement for the student. Children can
be asked to "recreate in their own words an especially memorable scene or moment from a book, play, or movie without looking back at the original text" (4, pp. 233-234). Each student is instructed to choose a scene that aroused strong feeling in him, and to rewrite the scene, perhaps taking the role of a character in it. An activity of this type is especially good with those students who have difficulty making up stories on their own. The lesson can be restricted if the teacher wishes by asking students to recall scenes dealing with a particular theme such as sadness, friendship, or fear.

The Cinquain

Children's early attempts at writing poetry are often characterized by too much attention to rhyming words and not enough concentration on the content of the effort. A useful device for getting them involved with content is the cinquain, a verse form composed of five lines, each of which follows a specified form. The first line consists of one word giving the title of the cinquain. The second line contains two words describing the title, the third line has three words expressing an action, and the fourth line has four words expressing a feeling about the title. The fifth and last line consists of a one-word synonym for the title. The cinquain is very useful with children who have little or no experience with writing verse, since it does provide that
structure which the inexperienced need, but it also offers the freedom of individuality of expression (8, p. 17).

Writing on Assigned Topics or Content

Once the habit of writing has been firmly established as a regular experience in the classroom, children can be expected to exhibit increasing independence in expression. There will be less need for structured lessons involving all children in the same activity, and more need for a variety of writing situations readily available when needed. The teacher can provide a writer's box containing cards with suggested topics or content for writing. The student who is ready to write when no one else is can go to the box and select a card with a suggestion that appeals to him without requiring the time and attention of the teacher to get him started.

Possibilities for inclusion in the box are specific topics for imaginative writing, such as "If I Could Be Invisible," "Being Stubborn," or "What an Ant Might Think About." Cards detailing invented circumstances can be useful for getting young writers started. For example, a card directing the writer to keep a journal of his travels through a foreign country can provide an avenue for the integration of writing with social studies. The box might have a card instructing the child to write about a current event, projecting himself into the environment, or to write about
historical events from a first-person viewpoint. The teacher can include in the writer's box all those writing situations and suggestions which are uniquely suited to her students.
CHAPTER BIBLIOGRAPHY


A teacher interested in developing a composition program for intermediate students will necessarily have to deal with evaluation and publication of children's writing. All her diagnosis, planning, and stimulation activities will not result in producing better writers unless the culminating steps of evaluation and publication are carried out carefully and intelligently. Certainly, the writing program is based on the notion that children learn to write by writing, but this notion must be taken a step further—children learn to write better by sharing their writing with others who understand and appreciate it.

As an initial step in dealing with the question of evaluation, the teacher must accept the fact that "assigning writing tasks, grading them and marking the errors, and handing the papers back to the students is profitless activity" (10, p. 325). Evaluation must consist of more than marking, grading, and returning papers. Indeed, many scholars point out that marking and grading have no place in the evaluation of children's writing, but that the basic goal of a writing program should be to develop in the child the capacity for self-evaluation (10, p. 323). This goal of self-evaluation
in writing will not be an easy one to reach, since "the most difficult thing in teaching an art is to make a student recognize his mistakes" (9, p. 22), but it is a goal worth working toward.

Once the teacher realizes that her role in evaluation must consist of something more than being a marker of errors, she must seek alternatives. Should she just accept everything that children write, rewarding them with smiles and pats on the head for work that may be obviously poor? This is no solution. The teacher should be prepared to deal with a great deal of writing that is of poor quality, because it is quite likely that she "will get more bad writing than good when seeking self-expression in children" (1, p. 4). What is the teacher to do with the writing that is obviously bad? Burrows recommends that "if writing is just plain bad, drop it" (2, p. 108). Criticizing poor writing and giving low grades to the students who composed it will produce only negative results. Evaluative procedures must give positive results if progress is to be made.

In seeking alternatives to traditional evaluative procedures, the teacher should first consider herself, her students, and their writing. What can the teacher do in evaluation? What can she expect her students to do? And finally, what can be done with the writing that students produce? As these questions are answered, an effective evaluation system can be developed.
The teacher must first study the objectives stated at the outset of the program, particularly those which have to do with evaluation. Having accepted these as goals for her own program, she must go on to put them into practice. A positive, accepting attitude in the classroom is essential, as is involvement with children that goes far beyond the casual. In addition, she must begin a program of more rigorous composition evaluation at every level, concentrating on the total writing act as she evaluates. It may be helpful for the teacher to study a set of papers at intervals for the purpose of determining the progress of individuals as well as the class as a whole. Another helpful practice is for several teachers to discuss with each other their evaluative procedures, sharing problems and new ideas.

The burden of evaluation should rest on the students themselves. This statement is true for both self-evaluation and the evaluation of peers. Labrant advises telling "a student to work on his writing until it makes sense to him, and not to rely on his teacher to mark all his errors for him" (5, p. 419). Since self-evaluation is a very difficult quality to develop, the teacher might begin by having students help each other in this area. As the composition program begins, she should make clear to her students that they will be expected to evaluate each other, always stressing the constructive aspect of criticism. During periods of sharing
written expression, she can encourage this evaluation of peers by pointed questions and suggestions. When a student says he liked a particular piece of writing, he should be expected to tell why he liked it in specific terms. If a student complains that he could not understand something, he should be encouraged to tell the writer how he could improve his work. By placing strong emphasis on the practice of having students evaluate each other, the teacher takes advantage of the fact that "children are often more affected by the respect given their written products by their well-known classmates than they are impressed by the potential approval of a distant recipient" (3, p. 138).

The question of what to do with the writing that children produce brings up the matter of publication. Children's writing must not end up on the teacher's desk. It has already been stated that writing that is obviously poor should be discarded, but much that children write will need to be shared. Sharing completes the cycle of communication, giving meaning to the writing task that no grading system could ever accomplish. The question of how writing is to be shared will be determined by the particular type of writing, but the intermediate child should be beginning to write with his audience in mind, and that audience should be someone other than the teacher (7, p. 100).

Early in the composition program many children will be reluctant to let anyone see what they have written. This is
One reason for planning beginning activities that require writing to be shared only with the teacher, or activities that involve simple sensory responses. As the program develops, however, children should gain enough confidence in their work to want to share it. When this occurs, the teacher should be ready to take advantage of her opportunity by having a variety of means for sharing available.

Students can share by reading aloud their written work and then participating in discussions. They can make a class booklet for students to put their work in. One portion of the chalkboard might be set aside as a place "for writers only," and the class bulletin board offers wide possibilities for use. It might be planned around a particular theme such as the cinquain, or it might be left open for students to plan for its use. Another effective method of publication is to keep a typewriter available so that when children decide their work is ready to be "published," someone can type it for them. If facilities are suitable, a "writer's corner" might be arranged by placing a large screen or filing cabinet so that one corner becomes an area of quiet isolation. These are only a few of the many ways to help children share their writing. The ingenious teacher will find other ways suited to her students' needs.

As publication and sharing become the accepted and usual method of evaluation in a classroom, each child will
begin to become his own editor. Knowing that others will be
reading his written expression provides the best incentive
available for the student to make that expression as clear as
he possibly can. As the teacher guides children toward this
ideal state of individual editorship, it is best to encourage
them to "focus on one aspect (or technique) of writing at a
time" (4, p. 250). It is too much to expect that an inter-
mediate child should fully evaluate his own written work
(8, p. 7). Narrowing the focus to one aspect of writing
provides the setting for successful self-evaluation. For
example, in the sensory activities, as children share and
discuss their impressions, each child might evaluate his
work on the basis of choosing the best words to say what he
meant. As children become accustomed to self-evaluation and
to evaluation by peers, the teacher will find that they are
learning from each other more than they ever could if she
were the only one transmitting information and opinion.

In the total evaluation program, "writing, sharing,
evaluation by the class, and self-evaluation are closely
interwoven" (10, p. 325), and the teacher who utilizes this
interrelatedness will do the best job of evaluation. As
the composition program develops, students will be producing
more and more written expression. Some of this will be
discarded because it is poor, and some will be used for a
specific purpose and then discarded because there is no
need for permanency. But much of children's writing will
be worth keeping, and the practical questions of where and how to keep it must be answered. One of the best solutions to this problem is the suggestion that a folder for each student's work be kept and passed on yearly from teacher to teacher (6, p. 7). The teacher puts representative samples of the student's work into the folder with comments on his progress and problems. A collection of this type can also be invaluable to the student as he consults it to measure his own improvement. Each student might want to keep a folder of his own, thus providing for himself a personal record of his writing.

The major purpose of evaluation and publication is to give the child encouragement and incentive to write more and better. Evaluation must not be allowed to assume too much importance in the total composition program. Publication must be considered to be of equal importance; it must be remembered that in children's writing "what is happening to the child is more important than what he produces" (9, p. 323).
CHAPTER BIBLIOGRAPHY


8. Smith, Mabel C., "Does Correcting Errors Discourage Creativeness?" Elementary English, XX (January, 1943), 7-12.


BIBLIOGRAPHY

Books


Articles


Pryor, Frances, "We Can't Afford Not to Write," Elementary English XXXVIII (November, 1961), 509-512.

Shepherd, Terry R., "Communication," Elementary English XLV (December, 1963), 1081-1082.

Smith, Mabel C., "Does Correcting Errors Discourage Creativeness?" Elementary English, XX (January, 1943), 7-12.


Reports


Northwestern University Curriculum Center in English, A Teacher's Experience with Composition, Evanston, Illinois, 1965.