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How to Think

By Andrew Pudewa

But, I don't know what to write! How many times have we heard those words from a frustrated student? Of course what he is really saying is "I can't think of what to write," or even more bluntly, "I can't think." So we very helpfully suggest, "Well, now, I'm sure you can think of something..." You know the routine.

When students don't know what to write, the core issue isn't necessarily that they don't have anything to say (although sometimes we wonder what exactly is going on inside those heads...), but that they can't easily access what they know—in other words, get memories, images, facts, ideas, and concepts out of their brains. Our task as a teacher is to help with this process, and at the same time help them become independent of our help.

To get to the core of the issue, we must ask, what, then, *is* thinking? Some folks assume that thinking is when you sit around and wait for an idea to pop into your brain. If that were true, many of us would be waiting a long time! Others imagine that the primary goal of thinking is "being creative" and doing something that no one else has done before. If that were true, many of us would give up before we'd start.

So, what is the most essential skill involved in thinking, and how can it be developed? First, we must realize that thinking doesn't involve creating a "new idea" so much as it is simply finding something already in our brains and applying it in a new way. "Creative writing" is in fact almost an oxymoron. Human beings don't really "create" anything. Only God creates something from nothing; the rest of us are stuck with what we've got. Any "new" idea is really just a combination and permutation of previously existing information.

Therefore, in its simplest manifestation, thinking is this: getting stuff out of your brain. Now, it's obvious that we can't get something out of a brain that isn't in there to begin with, so don't try. You can explain it to children like this: "If you want to think—in other words get something out of your brain—just do what your mom does. If you know something, and your mom wants to know what you know, what does she do?"

Little kids sometimes say, "She yells at you." But, before she resorts to harshness, she usually... asks questions! "WHERE have you been? WHO else was there? WHY are you late, and HOW are you going to clean this up?" Mothers are

master question-askers. Of course! To get information out of a brain, you have to ask questions. And surely, as writing teachers, we do this—a lot (usually imitating mothers or journalists with the "who, what, why, when, where, how" technique). Since it seems a little like "cheating" to just tell the children exactly what they should write, we spend a lot of time and energy asking questions of our students to help them think of what to write. And it does help. But...

The crux of the matter is independence. How do we train them to access and extract information from their brain without direct facilitation? Great teaching isn't based on knowing how to ask good questions, but rather in training students to ask themselves good questions. Clearly teaching writing is the best way to do this, and the Teaching Writing: Structure & Style program is, without a doubt, the most effective method. How so? Every one of the nine units requires the student to ask themselves questions of gradually increasing difficulty.

The TWSS syllabus begins in Units I & II with a very simple task—making "key word" outlines. Immediately the problem of "I don't know what to write" is solved, as we let students essentially rewrite the content from a fable or short article line by line. However (and more importantly), we have begun the process of teaching thinking, because in order for them to actually make a key word outline, they must ask themselves a question. Although simple, it is a question: "What are the words in this sentence that will help me remember the basic idea?" The very act of asking that question to oneself initiates an active process of reading and of thinking. And because it is simple, all students can have immediate success with writing, and begin the habit of asking questions.

In Unit III, the questions get a bit harder (Who is in the story? When/Where do things happen? What is the problem? What do the characters think/say/do? How is the problem resolved? What is the message/lesson?). Fortunately, the answers can all be taken from an existing story and re-written into a similar one. The questions are a little tougher, but the answers are all provided. In Unit IV, the questions become harder still. (What are the available topics for this subject? What are the most interesting, important, or relevant facts within this larger amount of information, and what are the key words from these facts?)

In Unit V, we finally get to the kind of "brainstorming" most people associate with creative writing. As there is no existing "story" but only a set of pictures, the student has to think of and ask all the questions about the picture. (Who is in the picture? What are they thinking, saying, doing? Why are they thinking/saying/doing that? What happened before this picture? What might be happening outside the picture? What might happen after the picture?, etc.) The questions are harder; more thinking is required. With Unit VI, the complexity increases over Unit IV, as there are now multiple sources of factual information. In addition to the Unit IV question process, there's the added question: How do I organize all these interesting/important/relevant facts into one paragraph on that topic?

Finally in Unit VII, you get to the pure "notes from the brain" stage, which requires the student to come up with all the questions and all the answers. This is basically the "Writing Process" which has dominated most composition pedagogy for the last two decades. Sadly, many teachers who start with this "blank page" approach find that the complexity of introspection required by the student can be

overwhelming for many who have not had sufficient experience in asking and answering simpler questions. In Unit VIII and IX, we see the climax and goal of this program, where students must collect and organize information they've put into the brain (facts or story details), *and* ask questions about those facts or details in order to formulate an opinion and write an essay or critique.

With the gradual progression of questioning skills which the Structure & Style syllabus develops in students, thinking naturally improves. The habit of asking questions is the key. Notice: people who make a difference in the world—the leaders—are the ones who have a habit of always asking questions. "Why is that the way it is? What can be done to improve it? How did this develop? When can it happen?"

Sadly, our educational system is much more designed to have groups of children sit down, be quiet, and learn answers to questions they will be given later. The importance of asking questions, and learning how to ask yourself questions, is very much eclipsed by the emphasis on knowing answers. In truth, a student would learn much more by creating an end-of-the-chapter test than by taking one. To create the test, he would have to come up with the questions by asking himself, "What are the most important things, and why are they important?"—which would entail real thinking, whereas to take the test he simply has to spit out the answers he has been given.

So, this school year, put a special emphasis on teaching writing and thereby developing better thinking skills. If you use the TWSS syllabus, push through and accomplish at least a little bit of all nine units. See how it works. You may not yet have children of writing age, or perhaps you use a different approach to teaching writing. However, be sure to nurture, encourage, and even demand that your students actively and frequently ask themselves questions—for by doing so, they will surely make great progress in learning how to think.

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