

The Writing Process: A Means to Improving Writing Skills of the Student-Athlete

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Biographical Statement

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Introduction

Institutions of higher education, particularly state-supported regional institutions, are constantly faced with the dilemma of educating a heterogeneous student body through means designed for an homogeneous population. Student-athletes, with their wide range of socio-economic backgrounds, their dualistic purpose in attending college, and their unusual demands on time and energy, are a group often slighted by educational strategies designed for the "typical" college student. However, in the area of writing instruction there exists an easily implemented methodology that is beneficial to all. The writing process, or the Writers' Workshop Approach, is an excellent way to enhance student-athletes' writing skills, and the approach can be facilitated by academic advisors, study hall monitors, and tutors.

The State of Students' Writing Skills

Our present decade has seen a number of varied critiques of the higher education writing curriculum. Reports as far ranging as *The Nation At Risk*, articles in popular weekly news magazines, and research with a quantitative statistical base (Holdzkum & others, 1983) have all illuminated the need for improvement in college students' writing skills. The student body of Southwest Missouri State University (SMSU) is no exception, and an internal University study found that that 28 percent of the incoming freshmen expressed a desire for help in the area of writing. The same study provided an ACT profile of the 1986-87 freshman class, and it showed the ACT English subtest to be the lowest subtest score for freshmen males. The men's mean ACT English score was 18.1 compared to the same group's composite ACT score of 19.8 or to the ACT Natural Science subtest score of 22.9 (Summary of Enrolled Report, 1987). Clearly, the concern over students' writing skills is most justified.

Determining the factors leading to poor writing skills is far more difficult than ascertaining the problem itself. Numerous educators cite inadequate and antiquated instructional methods as a prime determinant. These writers, teachers, and researchers have seen the fallacy of the traditional English curriculum in which the mechanics of writing are taught separately from the act of writing (Briton, 1978; Elbow, 1973; Graves, 1978; Murray, 1978; Holdzkum & others, 1983; Rager, 1986; Sloan, 1984).

The problematic nature of writing instruction is compounded by the special academic problems of many male student-athletes (Mayo, 1986). We suspect the wide usage of nonstandard English by some minority athletes to be detrimental to their success in English or writing classes. While regional and minority dialects are "well-order, highly structured, highly developed language systems," speakers of nonstandard English encounter difficulties in writing in a dialect different from their own (Hennings, 1982, p. 242). Underwood (1986) recommends that academic advisers make a genuine effort not to allow substandard English, jargon, slang, and colloquialisms to interfere with standard communication and the subsequent academic success of black student-athletes.

Attempts to Remediate Writing Deficiencies

Universities and colleges have long understood the widespread nature of students' writing deficiencies. Many institutions, attempting to alleviate the problem, have developed remediation programs that offer classes in the traditional basics of writing. All too often, though, these remedial classes are mired in the same traditional grammar-based practices that may have already provided inadequate instruction for the college student lacking in writing ability. Faced with a learning environment in which failure has previously been experienced, students often lack the intrinsic motivation and effort to

make any real strides in their writing abilities.

Extrinsic motivation is also a problem with the remedial English programs of many universities. Our university, SMSU, offers a one-hour credit remedial English course for students scoring 13 or below on the English subtest of the ACT or who have failed an English proficiency exam in their freshman-level composition classes. These students are required to pass the one-hour remedial class (English 81) before they are allowed to enroll or re-enroll in the freshman composition classes (English 111 and English 120). Unfortunately, English 81 has the "Bonehead English" stigma, and students receive neither grade nor credit toward any degree program. Obviously, the lack of grade or credit diminishes a student's desire to strive for success, and English 81 is erroneously perceived as a punitive ordeal. This attitude is particularly prevalent among many of our student-athletes required to take English 81, and it results in some student-athletes spending two or three semesters floundering in the remedial course before they are allowed to enter the standard composition classes.

The SMSU English Department is acutely aware of the problematic nature of their remedial program, and they are in the process of revamping the goals and procedures of their remedial efforts. Maybe even more important, though, is the methodological shift occurring within the instruction of the composition classes. Like many erudite language arts facilitators across the nation, SMSU's English faculty is moving from the didacticism of traditional grammar-based instruction to the process-oriented Writers' Workshop Approach.

The Writing Process

The simplicity of the writing process has often been overshadowed by the multitudes who view writing as a mysterious and impossible task. Although writing is never an easy chore, one might view the actual solution to student-athletes' writing deficiencies as being very uncomplicated in nature. The solution involves writing being viewed as a process-oriented task which can be divided into four stages. These include 1) prewriting, 2) rough draft/initial writing, 3) proofreading/editing, and 4) final draft.

The first stage, prewriting, centers around language and experiences. Hennings cites many types of activities that may be utilized. These include:

1. Sharing experiences as a springboard for discussion and writing.
2. Using senses to gather data for thinking and expressing.
3. Brainstorming and charting ideas for future use.
4. Thinking out loud to help organize thoughts.

Research is also included in the prewriting stage because it gives content and substance to topics where experience is often lacking.

After the student has a clear purpose for writing, a rough draft is compiled of thoughts and ideas from the prewriting stage. It is at this time that

organizational tools such as outlines and charts provide direction for the initial writing. As with the first stage, the rough draft/initial writing stage can involve interaction which proves valuable in critiquing organization of content. With the information of a logical framework the student follows the guide to compose the initial writing.

The student is now ready for the third stage, proofreading/editing. During this stage the student proofreads the rough draft using prior knowledge of grammar, spelling, and punctuation. Reteaching and coaching may be necessary to strengthen mechanical weaknesses in writing. Hull (1987) found that students perform better on essays with peer interaction and peer/teacher feedback during the editing process.

The final draft stage is the last step in the writing process. It involves rewriting the composition with the changes made during proofreading and editing.

Utilizing the four stages of writing reduces the task to a process that can be taught and implemented to improve communication skills. The process-oriented approach to writing has been recommended for use across the curriculum, and it is appropriate for writers at any level of development (Braungart, 1985; Rager, 1986).

Working with Student-Athletes

Academic advisors can facilitate the improvement of student-athletes' writing by implementing the writing process through workshops, study hall, and tutorial programs.

1. Workshops—Workshops emphasizing the process approach should be provided for student-athletes. Too many college-age writers view writing as a "one-shot deal," where a paper is written with little forethought and immediately turned in or taken to the typist. An ongoing workshop program will help students develop an appreciation of the different steps involved in the writing process. If an academic advisor is uncomfortable with the idea of conducting a workshop on the writing process, qualified leaders can be found in the disciplines of English and Teacher Education.

2. Study Hall—Study hall monitors can facilitate the writing process by keeping track of student-athletes' writing assignments and developing an awareness of the prewriting, rough draft/initial writing, proofreading/editing, and final copy stages. Study halls should be structured so that students may interact in groups and provide each other feedback during the vital stage of editing and revising. Students learn from each other, and group work reinforces this important stage of the writing process. Finally, dictionaries, style manuals, and other writing resources should always be available in a study hall situation.

3. Tutorial Programs—We have found that tutoring in the area of English often consists of nothing more than a tutor correcting and rewriting a

student's hurriedly written paper. This accomplishes nothing for the student-athlete, and it raises an ethical question of who is actually responsible for the written work. Academic advisors should accept the role of establishing guidelines for tutorial sessions, and English tutors should be advised to emphasize the writing process rather than focus solely on the final product.

Conclusion

Academic advisors may or may not be experts in the field of writing, but they can provide invaluable assistance to student-athletes by creating an environment in which the writing process is allowed to flourish. Changing students' perceptions of writing from a "one-shot deal" to a process approach including the prewriting, rough draft/initial writing, proofreading/editing, final copy stages can be accomplished. Once student-athletes garner an awareness of the writing process, they will become more confident in their attempts at written expression.

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