Critical

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Thinking Skills

How Do They Relate to the Writing Process?

By Carolyn Jensen

I asked my 12th-grade college-preparatory class in Writing and Thinking Skills how many of them had ever completed an essay test by writing lots of words and filling the expected space, yet still lost points because what they wrote contained no actual substance. I was amazed that all 20 students claimed that this experience had never happened to them. Other things I learned from this discussion were that:

- Anyone can write;
- Writing assignments were invented by a sadistic masochist to torment students, rather than to enhance their learning;
- Thinking skills are inherent; and
- If an opinion is good enough for the majority, it should be accepted without further evaluation.

This experience further reinforced the notion that, students too often view writing as an "event" when they have to throw words on a page to fill a required amount of space. They try to overwhelm the audience (the teacher) with the length of their answer instead of following a process that allows them enough time to look critically at the subject matter and to profit from the assignment.

Realizing the need to combine diverse skills, I began teaching a Writing and Thinking Skills class about eight years ago. I found no anthologies or textbooks to draw upon, so I began talking to respected educators, reading what I could find, and creating a syllabus based on a wholistic view of language. I found that I didn't need special workbooks, games, or gimmicks. I just need to stimulate students to experiment with the mysterious, limitless "menu" God gave to each human being. When students realize that they can *initiate* reliable thoughts, writing down their ideas becomes more than a way of getting through the assignment.

Is Thinking More Than Just Thoughts?

What is thinking? Is it just a stirring in the head, or does it involve more? There are good thinkers and poor thinkers. Good thinkers have control over their thinking; they have learned to stop the mind from wandering when they need to focus on one specific matter, examine it, and form a judgment. They can discriminate between objectivity and subjectivity and can process abstract details as easily as concrete ones. In addition, they have the ability to combine these concepts in a cohesive way.

Thinking is a general term describing numerous activities from daydreaming to reflection and analysis. Here are some of the synonyms *Roget's Thesaurus* gives for the word *think*: *appreciate, believe, cerebrate, cognitate, conceive, consider, consult, contemplate, deliberate, digest, discuss, dream, fancy, imagine, meditate, muse, ponder, realize, reason, reflect, speculate, suppose, weigh.*

However, these are just the names we use for thinking. They really don't explain it. For thousands of years, humans have generated thought and have talked and written about it, but it remains in many ways one of the great mysteries of human existence.[1]

In light of this, what can we say about critical thinking skills? Simplistically, such skills must be developed in order for many of the above synonyms to occur! However, many students immediately sense a negative connotation to the word *critical*, thinking it means to find fault or to criticize. However, when combined with the word *thinking*, it takes on a different meaning. It becomes a mysterious process that involves several parts of the mind. Ruggiero defines critical thinking as follows:

When we think critically, we evaluate and judge the accuracy of statements and the soundness of the reasoning that leads to conclusions. Critical thinking helps us interpret complex ideas, appraise the evidence offered in support of arguments, and distinguish between reasonableness and unreasonableness. Both problem solving and decision making depend on critical thinking.[2]

Critical thinking skills are among the mysteries God has given us to develop throughout our lives. These skills grow and become a strength to the individual when they are put to use. Tasks that fail to challenge the mind to function in more than one sphere cause students to stagnate and become reticent to trust their God-given ability to originate thoughts. Tasks that challenge the mind through questioning, evaluating, and applying information encourage the student to transfer the skills to other situations, thus providing an atmosphere for growth.

Unfortunately, teachers often fail to encourage students to develop their interpreting, appraising, and distinguishing skills. These skills cannot be memorized, or spoonfed with a work sheet; instead, they are *cultivated*. In *The Ministry of Healing*, Ellen White addresses this issue:

Be not satisfied with reaching a low standard. We are not what we might be, or what it is God's will that we should

be. God has given us reasoning powers, not to remain inactive, or to be perverted to earthly and sordid pursuits, but that they may be developed to the utmost, refined, sanctified, ennobled, and used in advancing the interests of His kingdom.

None should consent to be mere machines, run by another man's mind. God has given us ability, to think and to act, and it is by acting with carefulness, looking to Him for wisdom, that you will become capable of bearing burdens. Stand in your God-given personality. Be no other person's shadow. Expect that the Lord will work in and by and through you.

Never think that you have learned enough, and that you may now relax your efforts. The cultivated mind is the measure of the man.[3]

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The author helps one of her classes with prewriting techniques.

How does this challenge relate to teaching writing skills? Critical thinking skills can be cultivated and developed through the writing process. When writing is approached as an "event" or a "happening," it cannot reflect the intricate processing that the mind can do or that Ellen White referred to above. Words quickly thrown on a paper can certainly be a seed, but it is the planting, fertilizing, watering, and weeding that makes the word seed grow into a fruit worth harvesting.

There are several schools of thought regarding the "writing process." I view it as a series of recurring steps used to complete a piece of writing. I have found that having too many steps discourages younger students, while too few steps serve only to confuse them. Visualizing the process (or putting it into written form) removes some of the fear and confusion attached to the term *process*. The process referred to in this article is as follows: prewriting, writing (drafting), revising, proofreading (editing), and publishing.

Connecting the Writing Process With Critical Thinking

Prewriting is the planning stage. This is the most important part of the whole process. Prewriting generates the thought process that produces guiding words that aid in choosing a topic and developing it. It also diminishes feelings of panic about the prospect of actual writing.

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Ideas can come from stories, personal experiences, assigned reports, anecdotes, or other sources. The student should list as many topics as possible, then choose the one in which he or she has the most interest. After the topic is chosen, it needs to be shaped to fit the length and scope of the assignment. If the required length is one paragraph, the topic must be limited to one facet of the subject; if it is a research paper, a topic with many facets is needed. As the student puts appraisal and discrimination skills into practice, critical thinking occurs.

There are many ways of generating thought: brainstorming, questioning (particularly using the questions Who, What, When, Where, and How), clustering, webbing, outlining, etc. Writing promotes the transfer of thought from the mind through the hand and back to the mind through the eyes, thus allowing visualization. With training, the student will be able to choose the best way to organize the finished product. For example, clustering (sometimes referred to as mapping) is excellent for description—the main topic is the central focus and lines point to subtopics. Brainstorming and questioning are better for persuasion, since they suggest logical progressions and make it possible to list ideas numerically. These methods of classifying and prioritizing have a greater effect on the reasoning skills because the student can actually see the ideas he or she is working with. This reduces students' impatience with the extra time required for prewriting, since they see that it is making the project more manageable rather than lengthening it.

The drafting stage (sometimes called the sloppy copy) involves the actual in-

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Students can use the computer for word processing or creating illustrations.

terpreting of the student's ideas. At this point, the writer uses the prewriting exercise to organize ideas into a meaningful sequence. This is not the time to be overly concerned about grammar, spelling, or syntax as the student transfers the ideas to the designated format.

Next is the revising stage. In order to accomplish more than proofreading, the student needs to use critical thinking skills to evaluate and judge style, word choice, and coherence. I always tell my students to read their work aloud—first to themselves, and then to a partner. This step gives insights into the paper's readability, and forces the student to think about the accuracy of the statements and the soundness of the reasoning. Using the prewriting as a guide and having students question whether their writing matches and fulfills the original goals helps develop their confidence in their ability to initiate critical thought. Many students are afraid of this stage and want the teacher to do it for them. I have found that when I ask questions early in the process, they are encouraged to continue working on their own.

The last two stages, proofreading and publishing, also offer opportunities to use thinking skills. Indeed, failure to incorporate these skills at this point means that students will be unable to successfully transfer the information from a worksheet to make it their own creation.

This process can sound complicated; yet it really is the basis for learning at any level. For example, how do babies learn to speak? Without any knowledge of processes, they are limited to experimenting to find the best way to make a sound or word. In time, they classify and evaluate the way to produce the right sound. Then they begin saying it. And they don't say it only once—they keep "revising" it until they find the best way to communicate. They then "proofread" and test the word by trying to find its context, and finally "publish" it by using it at the appropriate time. Keeping in mind the learning ability and the age of the student, writing and thinking processes can be developed throughout formal schooling. Students who learn to use these skills with confidence will continue to develop and apply them through life in vocational and avocational pursuits.

Incorporating the Skills in the Classroom

Critical writing and thinking skills can be successfully taught to any grade level. By being creative and adapting expectations, a multigrade teacher can give writing instruction at a number of levels simultaneously, using the same lesson plan. Following are suggestions for incorporating critical thinking skills into a lower-grade writing program. With some modification, the model can be used with upper grades as well.

A Personal Experience

I have seen students grow in their thinking skills through writing. Jeff, a student in my Writing and Thinking Skills class, was extremely bright and felt competent about writing. However, until he took my class, he had not been challenged to wrestle with more than surface ideas. Moreover, he thought that his opinion was the only one that counted, and once he formed an opinion, he needn't look any further!

We were analyzing a short story one day, and Jeff took issue with the theme being discussed. He became rude and upset the whole class. My daughter, who was in the class, asked me later why I didn't just send him to the principal. I chose instead to turn the issue into a writing assignment. I had the students collect support and evidence for their opinions through prewriting and then to write a paper for homework. Jeff was too impatient to look beyond his initial outburst, so he wrote a paper with no real substance, which earned him a poor grade. He was so angry he wanted to drop the class, but his father, who worked at the school, told him he couldn't.

Gradually, because he was motivated to earn an "A," Jeff began to grow in his thinking skills. He realized there was more to writing than mechanics and surface reaction. His papers began to show the result of this growth. As his thinking became more disciplined, he used questioning skills to form judgments. At the end of the year, Jeff applied for several scholarships requiring essays. One of them asked him to write about the teacher from whom he had learned the most. He began his essay with, "The teacher I have learned the most from is not the teacher I liked the most. In fact, there were times I never liked her at all. I thought I knew how to think, but I really didn't know at all." Jeff went on to West Point. In his freshman composition class, his first essay was returned with the comment that someone had taught him how to write. Well, I really just facilitated the skills he already had. He learned to use that mysterious part of his mind that God has given to each of us.

Critical thinking skills can be cultivated and developed through the writing process.

Sharing stories with a group promotes pride in the finished product and reveals areas that need further work.

When applying this model, be sure to check students' work at each stage to survey their progress.

1. *Choose a topic.* Have the students study an object of their choice such as a flower, rock, or any object within their learning sphere. Elicit as many verbal responses as possible to stimulate their imaginations about the appearance, purpose, function, etc., of the object.

2. *Limit the topic.* After discussion, have each student choose the aspect of the object that most interests him or her.

3. *Gather information.* Have each student create a cluster by first drawing a circle with the name of his or her item in the center, then completing the cluster by putting related words in circles surrounding the original circle. Students should not try to create relationships with the middle "interest" circle at this stage.

4. *Coordinate and classify.* Demonstrate on the chalkboard or an overhead projector how to evaluate the sub-circles: If a sub-circle relates closely to the large circle, proceed to the next one. If not, cross it out. After all the sub-circles have been evaluated, the student can arrange them in descending order of importance.

5. *Write.* Now have students create ideas (sentences), using the circled words in numerical order. They can use as many sentences as necessary to convey the idea.

6. *Revise.* Have each student read his or her draft aloud to you (for younger students) or to a partner (for older students). After hearing the draft, the listener should be able to tell the reader what the "story" is about. If there are gaps, the writer will need to fill them in. If the story strayed from the main topic, unrelated material must be removed. As students become successful at this stage, they will develop confidence in their discrimination skills and be willing to take more responsibility.

7. *Proofread.* At this point, students should check sentence structure, making sure that each idea is complete. This helps them practice their problem-solving and logic skills. This is a good place to teach punctuation and dictionary use. I urge older students to use a computer and spell checker, as it helps catch most spelling errors.

8. *Publish.* Have the students make a final copy, taking care that it is neat and attractive. To further encourage creativity, have students illustrate their work or design a special cover sheet.

This suggested lesson plan is intentionally general. It can be applied to any level and adapted to the desired level of intricacy. The steps become more involved as the student's maturity grows. As he or she becomes a capable thinker, the assignments can become more involved and greater emphasis can be placed on form and style. As the teacher challenges the students and shows appreciation for their work, they become confident about their ability to create ideas and meet writing challenges.

I encourage you to experiment and learn more about combining writing and thinking skills. By helping our students to expand their minds, we become more motivated to create our own assignments or modify existing ones instead of relying entirely on textbook-provided assignments. This helps us to sharpen our own critical thinking skills.

A more detailed discussion of this process is available in the book *Thinking Writing* by Carol Booth Olson, published by Harper Collins Publishers.

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REFERENCES

1. Vincent Ryan Ruggiero, *Beyond Feelings: A Guide to Critical Thinking* (Palo Alto, Calif.: Mayfield Publ. Co., 1984), p. 12.

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3. Ellen G. White, *The Ministry of Healing* (Mountain View, Calif.: Pacific Press Publ. Assn., 1942), pp. 498, 499.