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Decoding the Planning of Writing for English Language Learners Preparing to Take the
New York State English Regents Exam

Our students come to us without much thought about the writing process, and how it can strengthen their writing output both for high stakes testing like the Regents, and for class essays and compositions. I work at an international high school. All of our students are recent immigrants, who are struggling to learn English at the same time that they are expected to move through the NY state requirements for graduation. This generally means being able to pass the Regents exam in English, which relies heavily on writing two coherent essays in different styles. Our school also requires students to produce a portfolio of essays and projects written for Math, History, Literature, and Science in lieu of the Regents tests in these topics. In short, they have to write a lot to graduate from high school

My working group in the Decoding the Disciplines decided to focus on the bottleneck of planning for writing, which most students skip. They don't consider writing a process, and they don't think about how the process can help strengthen their writing. The writing process reduced to the bare minimum is this:

- Plan
- Write
- Fix

We decided to decode the process of planning for writing. How do experts do it? How do we do it? How can we transfer our knowledge to students? I practiced the ideas developed through this project in the context of a Regent's Preparation weekly class I have been teaching this year,

to prepare students to pass the ELA Regents Test. All of the students in the class have taken and failed the test at least once, some multiple times.

Step 1: What is the Bottleneck to Learning This in Class?

From a teacher's point of view: Ideas presented in the essay are often jumbled and unclear. Paragraphs mention multiple, seemingly unconnected ideas briefly, with no extended discussion of how or why the writer believes these points connect. There is no clear flow of ideas, which often separates acceptable writing from exceptional writing.

From a student's point of view: Our students are heavily reliant on teachers providing graphic organizers that walk them through the organization process. Without the graphic organizers, are they able to produce an outline on their own? Do they know what an outline is? Students have internalized the idea of an introduction, body, and conclusion, but are not certain about what kind of information goes into each section.

Step 2: How Does an Expert Do These Things?

Writing organization and flow suffers because of a lack of time and conceptual planning before the writing begins. A lot of the work of writing begins before your pen hits the page. Considering our own processes more deeply, we recognized that we undergo many steps in preparing to write. These steps include reading and rereading the prompt, developing areas of research or evidence we need to find before starting to answer the prompt, reflecting on the genre of the assignment and the likely expectations of the reader, creating an outline specific to the task, and revising our work as we write.

A lifelong culture of test prep has over-emphasized drafts as finished pieces of writing work. On the English Regents students are graded on drafts of two essays; there is not the time or

expectation for much planning or revision. These testing essays are emphasized in our curriculum in order to help students perform well on these important exams, but it negatively impacts their writing organization and flow.

In a discussion about how experts plan writing, we used ourselves as the “experts.”

These were steps in the writing process as we actually did it:

- Close reading, and recording one’s thoughts as one reads
- Noticing categories and patterns
- Writing down patterns, which can become major themes, discard some
- Write down patterns, then choose 3 or 4
- Find quotes that embody the patterns
- Start writing to begin thinking
- Sometimes use color coding to differentiate sections
- Developing ideas as one writes
- Using writing as a way to develop thinking
- Then winnowing out initial “flow” of writing to find nuggets
- First draft has no boundaries, is uninhibited
- Then comes the pruning time -- organize ideas by common patterns or themes -- use color-coding possibly to differentiate, visually
- Look for moments of clarity in writing
- Develop ideas for the planned audience
- Develop writing structures based on patterns in text.
- Use annotation as the basis for the uninhibited flow first draft

This examination of process by experts is the reverse of what we expect students to do! Except that close reading should always form the foundation of writing. Planning is inseparable from writing and revising! I don't really outline -- I just write and then sort out the ideas afterwards. I don't really know what I am going to say or even what I should say until after I have written in an uninhibited fashion, letting it all flow out uncritically, then sifting the garbage from the gold.

Step 3: How Can These Tasks Be Explicitly Modeled?

The question I have is will this method of writing work with students with English Language Learners who have limited English vocabulary and in many cases, limited formal education before coming to the United States. Some have undiagnosed learning disabilities. Will the "expert" process work with students who have not yet internalized text structures? In the past, I have taught with the assumption that a strong outline will compensate for lapses in reading and writing prowess. Is this a mistake, if I don't really do this myself? Is it true that structure is a marriage of close reading and ruthless revision? Of sorting and sifting after the fact? Will this work with students too? Perhaps the bottleneck here in fact is not planning in the traditional sense, but annotation. David Pace's article "Decoding the Reading of History: An Example of the Process," addresses this kernel of good writing -- the ability to decide on what is important to remember in reading. That the ability to differentiate between essential and nonessential information is in fact the core skill needed in planning, and what my students are notoriously weak in. Students need to be successful in a highly selective process of close reading.

In our Regents English test preparation class and I have been trying some of Pace's ideas for teaching differentiating between essential and nonessential information. See below -- several

paragraphs from the Regents ELA test, in which information that seems important to me is in big type.

All information is not equal. You cannot remember every detail, so you have to decide...

- What to remember
- What to forget

An example of what to remember (BIG TYPE) and what to forget (small type):

Jan Zabiński and his wife Antonina managed the Warsaw Zoo, which was home to some 1,500 animals....

For years, **Polish scientists dreamt of a big zoo in the capital to rival any in Europe**, especially those in Germany, whose majestic zoos were famous worldwide. Polish children clamored for a zoo, too. Europe enjoyed a heritage of fairy tales alive with talking animals—some almost real, others deliciously bogus—to spark a child’s fantasies and gallop grown-ups to the cherished haunts of childhood. It pleased Antonina that her zoo offered an orient of fabled creatures, where book pages sprang alive and people could parley with ferocious animals. Few would ever see wild penguins sledding downhill to sea on their bellies, or tree porcupines in the Canadian Rockies, balled up like giant pinecones, and she believed that meeting them at the zoo widened a visitor’s view of nature, personalized it, gave it habits and names. Here lived the wild, that fierce beautiful monster, caged and befriended.

(January 2019 ELA Regents Test, Part 3 Essay passage)

Pace also embeds audio in his sample text, in which he opines aloud on how he is reading the text. I don't know how to do this but it sounds like a really good idea. An alternative idea is to read the passage aloud and "think aloud" as you read. The next few paragraphs students can work on in small groups, and then present to the class their sorting of essential from nonessential information.

My initial response to the task was to let students understand the concept of organizing writing -- through the analogy of building a house. The goal is to build a sense of text structure being an actual structure, although not physical. See below:

1. How do you build a house? What are the parts of a house? What are the steps to building a house?
2. How is building a house similar to writing an essay? (make Venn diagram)
3. What is a building scaffold? What is the purpose? Is a scaffold permanent or temporary? Why?
4. What are the scaffolds we use in writing?
5. Pick an easy problem/ question (Examples: Who is a better singer, Drake or Cardi B? Should our cafeteria sell candy?)
6. Plan your essay using a house planner (example provided with questions within house structure)
7. Create an outline- work with your partner to rewrite your plan as a list, no picture! Then trade outlines with partner- are they similar or different?
8. Apply thinking to outline for next essay

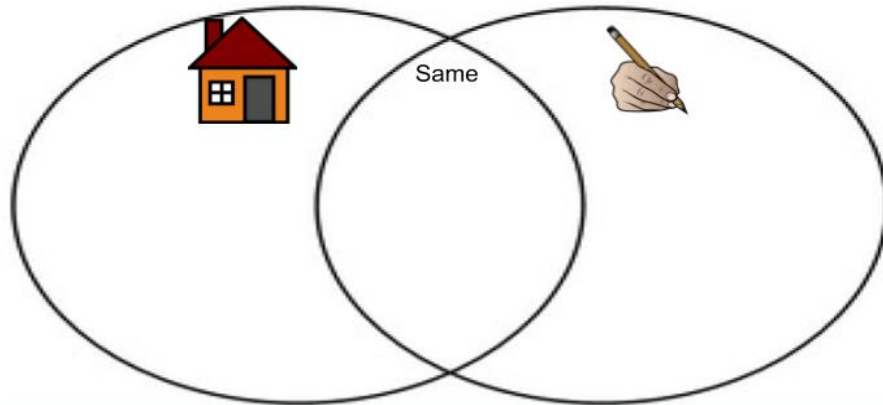
The only problem, is that this is stressing structure first, which is not what I actually do. If the true precursor of organizing writing is close reading, perhaps the analogy of a detective finding clues would be more apt.

Other methods of modeling planning were:

- Think-alouds
 - Teachers will model annotating and thinking through a prompt question (What is it really asking?) Am I answering all parts of it? Show rereading directions and checking rubric as guide)
- Class activity
 - After essay is assigned, show students models of multiple planning tools to select the ones best suited to the task and their preference for planning
- Exemplars
 - Students collaborate to analyze how a piece of writing is organized, making a visual depiction of the essay- could be an outline or a spiral or whatever best shows
- Conferencing
 - Teacher will meet one on one with students to discuss student's purpose/ thesis in piece of writing, what they are doing well, what they are struggling with and offer suggestions related to conceptual understanding as it translates through their writing, so feedback can be incorporated immediately into written work

The house analogy might have relevance if “experts” have internalized the basic text structures relevant to different kinds of writing, and students have yet to do this.

How is building a house similar to writing an essay?



Work this out with a partner on a piece of paper.

What is a scaffold? What is the purpose?



Is a scaffold permanent or temporary? Why?

What are the scaffolds we use in writing?

Discuss this with a partner. Write down your ideas.



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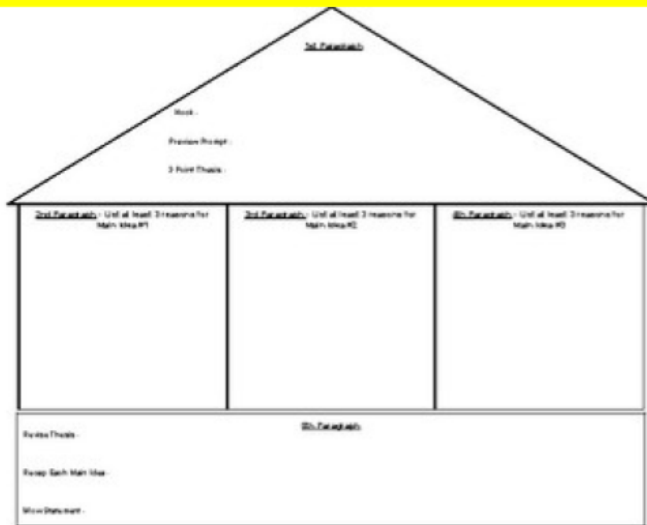


Pick an easy problem/question

Examples:

- Who is a better singer, Drake or Cardi B?
- Should our cafeteria sell candy?

Plan your essay using a house planner



Create your own house planner. This is one idea.

Step 4: How will students practice these skills and get feedback?

If close reading, annotation, and outlining are the kernels of planning for writing, how can we practice that? Here are some ideas:

- Share the basic structure of a paragraph (see below).
- Ask students -- where is the main idea in a paragraph?
- Teach students to skim an article by reading the first sentence only
- Read more if you come to something that requires it.
- “Read something, say something” -- comment, question, summarize the main idea sentences with an annotation
- Teach two different types of annotation -- gist and talkback -- gist is a summary of the main idea, talkback being a comment, question, etc.
- Have students practice through partner reading -- each student taking turns reading and commenting.

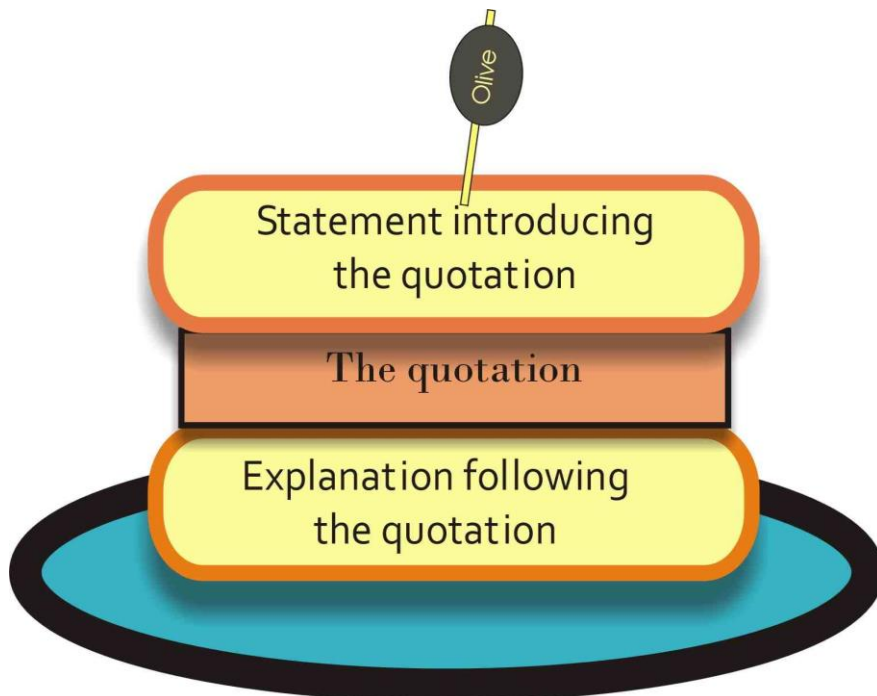
- Organize a “tea party” where students walk around the room with a central idea quote that they explain to each person they meet at the “party.”

Here are some basic writing tools for students to practice with:

Basic Paragraph: MEC



Quote sandwich:



Step 5: What Will Motivate the Students?

Students need to have a way into the project. In our school, with students originating in over 40 different countries, I find the best way to begin is with the students' lived experiences. Start with a similar idea from their home country, and let them teach the class this example of our theme.

The other way our school manages motivation is through project-based learning. Students work in groups on a real-world problem -- they need to find the way to present the problem and its possible solutions.

Some of our students arrive in the U.S. with limited formal education and they can be daunted and intimidated with the linguistic load required for close reading. Some ways around this is to provide multiple pathways and interdisciplinary approaches into a project. Partner reading, skimming, and annotation help with this. Multisensory inputs such as watching related movies and videos, adding visual components to learning are another, and working with "realia" -- real life objects is another. . Small group opportunities to increase reading skills help. Language experience and the opportunity to experience informal writing, such as journals and free-writes help. Language experience is when students discuss an experience, and the teacher records their thoughts. The teacher then types the discussion, and students practice reading it. Starting with orality is a path toward making reading and writing less abstract and frightening. Having students conduct interviews is another venue for incorporating orality into a project that culminates in a major piece of writing. Incorporate the familiar in with the unfamiliar.

A very important consideration in constructing a project and/or assignment is that it is culturally relevant to the student. Students will have more motivation if they understand that they have a stake in the project.

However, the Regents Test experience does not allow for any of the supports for English Language Students. The assumption is that they have been successfully applied before students get to 11th and 12th grade where they have to face an unfamiliar writing task without supports.

Step 6: How Well Are Students Mastering These Learning Tasks?

As Middendorf and Shopkow note in their book *Overcoming Student Learning Bottlenecks*, assessment comes in two types -- assessment for grading and assessment for learning. Grading assessment is generally the culminating paper due at the end of the semester -- the high stakes project. However, if you wait until that point to assess a student, as Gregor Novak comments, these grading assessments are like “autopsies in that they come too late to help the patient.”” (p. 139). Thus learning assessments -- often multisensory activities that require students to create something new with the knowledge they have learned -- are essential.

For example, in my Regent’s Prep class we are practicing what to remember and what to forget in reading as a way to come to being able to select what’s important in a text. We are practicing “Pop-Up Reading” based on David Pace’s methods. First I read a paragraph in which I had selected what I considered important and showed it in large type:

When you read...

decide what you will **REMEMBER** and what you will **forget**.

It is impossible to remember everything.

The Sinister Side of Cash

When I tell people that I have been doing research on why the government should drastically scale back the circulation of cash—paper currency—the most common initial reaction is bewilderment. Why should anyone care about such a mundane topic? But paper currency lies at the heart of some of today’s most intractable public-finance and monetary problems. Getting rid of most of it—that is, **moving to a society where cash is used less frequently and mainly for small transactions—could be a big help.**

I read the text substituting “blah blah blah” for the small letters and reading the large type words only. Then the students selected their “pop up” words in the next paragraph and we did “blah blah” reading in unison with everyone calling out their pop up words to remember and saying “blah blah blah” for everything else. The third paragraph they did blah blah reading at their individual tables. Next, students will work on enlarged text paragraphs in small groups, underline the pop-ups, and share them with the class.

In my initial experience with pop-up reading, I noticed that many students were still selecting non-important text to remember -- will they just need more practice? For example, just picking out numbers. A process of feedback and clarification will be needed to help students focus on moments of clarity in the text for them that has more meaning than a single number.

Additional learning assessments will be students writing outlines in small groups and getting teacher feedback, and students writing “paragraph posters” together, which they will present to the class after getting teacher feedback.

Works Cited

- Middendorf, Joan and Leah Shopkow. *Overcoming Student Learning Bottlenecks: Decode the Critical Thinking of Your Discipline*. 2018. Stylus.
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