Vision and Revisions: Creative Writing Techniques in Peer-led Tutorials

By Jordan Burr

Often a student walks into the writing center professing to suffer from "writer's block," though this ostensibly simple symptom often belies a more profound problem-an inability to engage creatively with the text. Speaking as a creative writer, I can attest to the fact that a writer is infinitely more engaged with a text with which he feels a personal connection. The question then becomes this: How can we instill the same sense of personal engagement that seems to be lacking with academic writing that many students feel naturally toward purely creative writing? Wendy Bishop, in her article "Is there a Creative Writer in the House," suggests that utilizing creative writing techniques creates a stronger sense of personal connection between a writer and his writing, which generally leads to a better paper whether it be purely creative writing or academic writing (45). I have established a set of creative writing techniques, culled from both writing guides and my own experiences, which are uniquely appropriate for a 50 minute, peer-led tutorial. The following techniques can be used to solve specific, practical problems, such as writer's block, as well as the more profound problem of writer engagement.

Pre-writing techniques, such as clustering, can be useful for a writer who hasn't yet developed any connections between the ideas he wishes to explore. According to Mary Brandvik, clustering is "a nonlinear brainstorming process that generates ideas, images, and feelings around a stimulus word. It works because it seems to avoid critical censorship and allows students to make intuitive connections" (13-4). During a tutorial, the tutor can help guide the clustering exercise in productive directions. For instance, the tutor can engage the student in dialog to discover the central idea in the student's mind. After circling this idea in the center of the paper, the student can then draw lines connecting the central idea to peripheral ideas. After this is done, the tutor can help the student identify the most interesting or relevant connections of ideas around which to write the paper. The uncritical aspect of these techniques is essential to the early stages of writing, when the creative impulse to write must be stronger than the critical impulse to erase.

Start-up exercises can be useful for a student who knows what he wants to write about, but is stuck on those tricky first few sentences. A creative writing teacher of mine had a start-up exercise that entailed inserting your topic ideas into the sentence structure of the first sentence of your favorite book (or any writing). A tutorial exchange of this kind might go something like this:.

Jim (student): I want to write about how The Crucible isn't really a communist play, like it was charged with. But I don't know how to start it off.

Mike (tutor): (picking up the first book on his desk, Existentialism by Jean Paul Sartre): "I should like on this occasion to defend existentialism against some of the charges which have been brought against it." Now, try saying what you want to say about the crucible using Sartre's first sentence as a model.

Jim: OK. "I would like at this time to defend Arthur Miller's The Crucible of the charges of Communism brought against it by the House Un-American Activities Committee."

Mike: Great. Now that you have a possible idea for your paper, let's keep brainstorming for ideas you can use to prove your thesis.

This example of a start-up exercise can allow a hesitant or overcritical writer the opportunity to get beyond their first-sentence paralysis. Once the writing is complete, the writer will usually want to go back and revise the first few sentences to better fit with the style of the rest of their work. The important thing here is that the writer now has something on the page to give them confidence until they can find their stride and their own unique style.

Postoutlining is a technique which consists of reading back over a draft and identifying the topic sentence of each paragraph in the form of an outline. From a tutorial standpoint, I've found it more productive to encourage the student to simply write a topic sentence beside each paragraph, as this generally seems more like straightforward revision, rather than the "extra work" which writing a separate outline seems to entail. From here, it is easier to see how each paragraph relates to the overall thesis and, therefore, it becomes easier to reorganize the general structure of the paper. Wendy Bishop emphasizes the opportunity that postoutlining gives to a writer to add a creative touch while rethinking their organization. For example, "there may be room for a diary entry, a poem, an aphorism, a quote, in a seemingly…traditional paper" (48).

It is not uncommon, as Phyllis Creme found, for students to perceive a "conflict between being creative, which is associated with putting oneself and one's ideas into the writing, and [being] critical, which involves fulfilling the academic requirements" (Creme 151). As tutors, one of our goals should be to demonstrate that there is not only a lack of conflict between creativity and analysis, but that all great works of analysis are ultimately shaped by both creative and analytic processes. Creative writing techniques can not only help with difficult practical problems such as writer's block and revision, they can also encourage an experience of writing that most clearly expresses the writer's own voice, thus engaging the writer with his own text, an indispensable step to successful writing.

Works Cited

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