

# Creating Better Writers through Coaching

reprinted from the Fall 2013 newsletter of the North Dakota Council of Teachers of English with permission from the author

I have seven children. Two are done with college, two are in college, one is a senior in high school this year, one is a third grader, and one is just about three years old. As each of the older five have journeyed through academia, I have noticed an overall common thread of frustration: the lack of coaching as they've struggled to write assigned papers. Instructions are given, resources are shared, encouragement is ever present, but they have each questioned whether they are doing it right as they stare at their computer screen at midnight, alone in their room. Sometimes, they've been lucky and received a good grade, but other times, they've been penalized for a wrong turn they made early on in the writing process, but no one was there to help guide them back onto the right track. As I enter my ninth year of teaching journalism and sophomore English, **I am more convinced than ever that writing should be a process where the student and the teacher journey together every step of the way.** Here are ten unique and maybe somewhat unconventional techniques for coaching student writing that in my experience have proven positive results:



## ABOUT SUE...

Sue Skalitzky advises journalism at Century High School and Legacy High School in Bismarck, North Dakota. She teaches Journalism 1 at both schools, advises both schools' newsmagazines and Web sites, advises Legacy's yearbook and teaches English 10. Over the past 27 years, Sue has worked as a medical photographer, a journalist, a leadership speaker and a freelance writer. She is currently the Journalism Education Association state director for North Dakota.

**1 USE GOOGLE DOCS.** Because writing is a process, you need to check what your students are writing and do it often. The only way I have figured out how to do this effectively is with Google Docs. Google Docs is a Web 2.0 tool that allows you and your student to work on the same document, even at the same time. Imagine their Google document hanging in a room with 200 windows surrounding it. The curtains are drawn on these windows until the student "shares" the document using an email address. The document is not emailed; an email is sent notifying the recipient that a document has been shared with him or her. Once that recipient receives notification and logs on to Google Docs, the curtains on that one window are opened and he or she can view the document and collaborate with the writer and/or edit the content. It may sound extremely time consuming to be glancing daily at your students' writing, but, in reality, this process has saved me hours of correcting final drafts.

**2 DEMAND THAT YOUR STUDENT WRITERS "GET THE NAME OF THE DOG."** "At the St. Petersburg Times, editors and writing coaches warn reporters not to return to the office without 'the name of the dog.' That reporting task does not require the writer to use the detail in the story, but it reminds the reporter to keep her eyes and ears opened. . . . The good writer uses telling details, not only to inform, but to persuade." (Roy Peter Clark, "Writing Tools: 50 Essential Strategies for Every Writer." Little, Brown, 2006) This definitely works with my journalism students as they interview sources for the stories they write. But, I've also noticed it helps my English students to not overlook necessary details for their researched based papers. And, when asked to interview primary sources for a paper, they tend to ask more than enough questions instead of not enough.

**3 TEACH YOUR STUDENTS TO ASK FOR HELP.** Belaboring a problem with his or her paper only causes anxiety that prevents the student from moving ahead. Often, they hit the point of no return. Make yourself available and approachable to your students. As often as possible, I try to schedule a lab, or use netbooks, so my students are writing in my presence and I can be available to them while they are experiencing a problem. I have also chosen to make my cell number available to my students in the event that they have a question about homework outside of school hours. I know many teachers are not comfortable with this, but I have never had an issue with any student abusing this privilege. But, I have experienced students being able to move on with their assignments or with their papers because a small obstacle was removed by them being able to contact me. If you are not comfortable giving out your cell number, consider giving them your email.

Continued on next page

# Creating Better Writers through Coaching, cont.

## **4 ENCOURAGE YOUR STUDENTS TO WRITE ON THE RUN.**

Students should take breaks from writing in order to get their creative juices flowing again. It has been scientifically proven! Our superintendent encourages movement in the classroom and loves hearing stories of unique ways of doing just that. The next time your students are writing a paper during your class period, try having them take active breaks:

- stand up halfway through the class
- pretend to ride a bicycle for one minute by pedaling with their legs
- change computers and do a one-minute peer edit then return to their own computer
- close their eyes and take five deep breaths at the end of each paragraph

**5 BUILD A TRUST CIRCLE.** Get your students used to sharing what they've written. Too often, the only person who reads what a student has written is his or her teacher. Add accountability and increase motivation by emphasizing peer editing and small group sharing. When we know that what we've written will be read by others, we tend to take the task a little more seriously. This is also true for our students. But, sharing with others has to coincide with building trust in your classroom. Your students need to be taught how to peer edit. I teach mine to give highs and lows. Highs are something they liked about the writing and the lows are constructive criticism. It is necessary that you also teach the students about confidentiality. What they read and discuss in class about another student's writing stays in the class. No one wants to hear about the quality of their writing at the lunch table later in the day.

## **6 DON'T EVER SETTLE FOR A FIRST DRAFT.**

Their first draft may be good, but is it great? Encourage your students to challenge each paragraph. Then challenge each sentence. Then challenge each word. Is there a better way to say what is being said? I am a firm believer that no piece of writing is ever finished. The only reason a paper ever gets turned in as complete, or an article published, is because we have deadlines. So, all students should be working on their papers for all the in-class time provided. Those students who say they are finished a day early should take one sentence at a time and write it five different ways and then choose the one they like the best. They can continue through their entire paper or until they run out of time. Writing is a skill that develops with practice. Don't let your students waste precious minutes because they are content with good enough.

## **7 MAKE ROOM FOR MISTAKES.**

Create an environment where students can be bold and fail, instead of an environment where students are afraid to veer from the well-worn path. Many of our students will develop a style or a voice that is very different from our own. Have an open mind when reading student work and allow them to grow as a writer, even if you don't like their style. Stick to your guns when it comes to grammar rules — although I believe there can often be exceptions there as well — and MLA format, but resist making them conform to your style. Also, be aware of where each student is at with their writing skills. Focus on improvement instead of having one standard for all students.

## **8 BUILD YOUR OWN PORTFOLIO WHILE THEY BUILD THEIRS.**

Write so you can develop empathy for your students as they write. I try to write along with my students. My favorite writing assignment to do this with is the personal narrative. I usually share my story verbally and then share my written version. This provides an excellent opportunity to teach students the difference between natural narratives and literary narratives. It is a powerful teaching tool when



Photo by Linda Barrington  
Editors of the Tower Times at Whitefish Bay High School work together on each issue by coaching their reporters to improve rather than fixing their writers' work.

# Creating Better Writers through Coaching, cont.

teaching how to write introductions and conclusions, how to transition between paragraphs, and how to use figurative language. When it comes to researched-based papers, attempt to complete one of your own during the summer and use it every year. The students don't need to know when you wrote it. This also allows you to teach by showing your work.

**9 GIVE EVERY WRITER PRAISE.** Give every writer constructive criticism. Be vocal about your students' writing. Even the most horribly written papers deserve some compliment. Seek out the one or more things the student did well. Don't just mark the errors. But, also show the student how they could make some small or big changes that would make their mediocre paper, good, or their good paper, great. Again, concentrate on coaching each student to set new personal writing records every time they complete another writing assignment. Focus on the individual, not the class as a whole.

**10 CELEBRATE EVERY COMPLETED PAPER.** Consider awarding every student for their writing efforts. Paper plate awards for best integrated sources, most improved writing, best detail, best introduction, best thesis statement, etc., are all a great way to publicly praise students for their efforts, no matter how small. Make a paper chain of accomplishment around your room, each paper written represented by a different color, each link representing a student. Verbal praise is always coveted by students, especially when they feel inadequate to the other students.

**EDIT COACH REPORTERS**

Coaching is a way for editors to help reporters solve a story's problems independently.

Coaching works because reporters generally know the problems they are having with a story, even if they can't quite decide what to do about them.

## WHAT IS COACHING?

Coaching is asking questions and listening, to help the reporter improve.

A coaching editor will talk to reporters before they leave the newsroom for an interview and as soon as they return, before they begin to write.

The coaching editor asks simple questions that can help the reporter focus the story, such as:

- What happened?
- What is your story really about?
- What does the reader need to know?
- How can you make this clear?
- What do you think of the story so far?
- What needs work?
- What do you need to do next?
- How can I help you?

COACH	FIXER
Helps the writer	Fixes the story
Helps throughout process	Fixes on deadline
Develops the writer	Undercuts the writer
Builds on strengths	Exposes weaknesses
Fosters independence	Creates resentment
Shares control	Takes control

Poster/handout by Linda Barrington