

Who are the Speakers



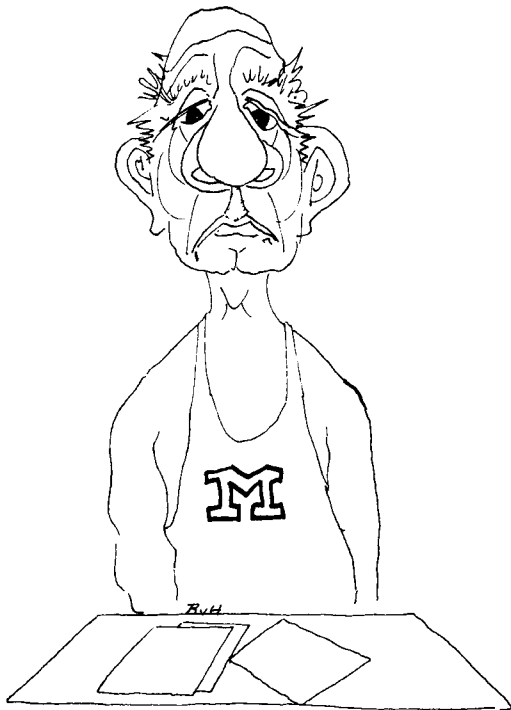
TEACHING ORGANIZATIONAL STRATEGIES

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In the visits of ECB members to Michigan schools, teachers regularly identify **organization** as the writing skill most difficult to teach and most needed by their students. Faculty members at the University of Michigan share the opinion of their secondary school colleagues, who, in responses to an ECB survey, identified the skill of "organizing the material to be presented" as "the most important to teach."

How can teachers do a more efficient and more effective job of teaching organization? Conventional teaching methods focus on the outline, the need for a beginning, a middle, and an end to an expository essay, and the structure of the paragraph (particularly the relation of examples and illustrations to a topic sentence). Yet many teachers believe that such methods do not bring students very rapidly to a mature writing style, particularly when there is insufficient time to assign and correct essays of 400 words or longer. Many student papers have the structure of exploded paragraphs with the "topic" forming the beginning, the illustrations the body, and a brief re-statement of the topic the ending. However, more complex problems of organization are demanded at the college-level and in government, business, and industry, and students faced with such tasks often quail and flounder.

In Workshop '80, I hope to work with participants to develop strategies that address the teaching of organization. Criteria for such strategies ought to include: 1) assignments that recognize the burdens of secondary school teaching loads and the limited time available for reading and evaluating student papers; 2) assignments that will capture students' enthusiasm and enable individuals to write effectively about subjects of interest to them; and 3) assignments that enable students to gain a sense of alternative strategies for writing tasks which require different organizational patterns.



After 37 years of pitting himself against the blankness of paper, aging UM student pauses to ponder a career in government, business, or industry, where he will probably quail and flounder.

Assignments that address the problem of organization might be structured to develop four skills: **re-arrangement, completion, imitation, and composition.** These categories do not constitute a curriculum or suggest a progressive acquisition of skills; yet they do provide a useful beginning for thinking about the problem.

Re-Arrangement

Re-arrangement is a strategy sometimes used by teachers to alert students to their sense of individual paragraphs. Separate sentences (reproduced on slips of paper) are distributed and students asked to put them into an order that makes sense as a paragraph. Such tasks invite students to consider various links that join sentences: sentence adverbials (like first or therefore), general and specific words, pronominal sequence, temporal and logical patterns, and the like. Consider, for instance, the following random set of sentences:

1. Those who sit in the front row on the side seem ambivalent, as though they need the magnetic pull of a teacher.
2. Normally prompt, he usually took a seat in the front row next to the door.
3. I think that students who sit in the center, front-row are the most serious.
4. I usually worry about those who choose the back corner.
5. James came to every scheduled class in our fluorescent-lit, pre-fab classroom.

Most students will have no difficulty in arranging these sentences into the coherent paragraph from which they were taken (viz. Thomas C. Wheeler, The Great American Writing Block, p. 71).

Re-arrangement helps students to become aware of the "clues" that create unity without obliging them or their teacher to master an elaborate vocabulary of technical terms, and like other writing tasks such exercises may be assigned individually or to peer groups for discussion and completion. **Question for discussion in Workshop '80: How can the principle of re-arrangement be extended to structures beyond the paragraph?**

Completion

Completion exercises may be modeled on the pattern of the ECB writing assessment in which a pair of initial sentences provides the subject, perspective, and language to be imitated and developed by the student writer. Teachers who have participated in ECB in-service programs and workshops often report considerable success with such assignments as a supplement to more conventional "topics" or free writing. We are not at all reluctant to share with teachers the attributes of the most successful essays we receive from our entering students,

particularly when our readers share the opinion that the best writers tend to be the best organizers. **A second question for Workshop '80: How can the principles of our ECB assessment be developed into a variety of writing activities in the secondary school classroom?**

Imitation

Imitation is often implied in the hidden agenda of secondary and college classrooms. Where students may believe that they have done badly because they didn't "give the teacher what s/he wanted," teachers often think that students are attempting to explain away failure by suggesting that the assignment called for something reflecting the teacher's personal preference or idiosyncratic quirk. Some justice usually characterizes both sides of the disagreement: for the student, the agenda was hidden; for the teacher, the student failed to perform. But imitation can be made part of the open agenda of the composition

class to the benefit of both teachers and students, not only through the imitation of general principles of clarity and elegance but also through the imitation of particular styles of writing. **Question for Workshop '80: How can we make imitation a recognized and valuable part of the writing curriculum?**

Composition

Composition, the last of the four skills, is the task that pits the students against the blankness of the paper. With my colleagues, I expect to assist teachers in formulating a strategy for making assignments that will be "cost-effective," ones that will justify the hard work of writing and the hard work of reading and evaluating. Our focus will be on the qualities of assignments that work best; our hope is that the principles we derive together will be amplified into a sheaf of assignments that workshop participants can make use of when they return to the classroom.