
Confessions of a “Bumpy Writer”

by Michelle Anne Fistek

As I was cleaning out my back room last summer, I stumbled upon some of my old college papers. One in particular caught my attention. It was a paper for a Diplomatic History class with the late Dr. Kenneth Crosby at Juniata College in Huntingdon, Pennsylvania. Dr. Crosby was famous for being a professor who worked closely with his students, and from the amount of red on my paper I can attest that he must have spent hours grading student papers. Looking at this paper and his comments made me begin to think about how I learned to write. Had these red marks been helpful to me?

Another question that came to mind was, am I subjecting my students to the same style of teaching? Conversations with Robert Miller made me feel there must be a better way to help my students with their writing than all those red marked pages.

I then attended Elaine Maimon’s workshop in June and many of my questions were answered. But first, let me go back to my college writing experiences to see why these red marks were of so little help to me as a writer.

College Writing

The professors at Juniata required much written work. I can’t remember a class that did not require a paper. Classes were demanding and challenging.

Despite all that writing, I have never enjoyed writing very much. I enjoy the research end of papers but the writing has always been torture for me.

My usual mode of writing a paper was (is?) to wait until the last possible minute to begin the composition of the paper. I would write out the first few pages, but then because of the snail's pace at which I type, would end up sitting in front of the typewriter "composing and typing" the last half of the paper. This would take all night long. Finally, I would read it over for typographical errors and make corrections. I always marveled at how I could reach the professor's door just seconds before the deadline. The paper would be deposited under the door, and I would hope to never see it again. Of course, I assured myself I worked best under pressure.

What, if anything was I learning about writing? Unfortunately, this style of writing was reinforced as professors rewarded me with A's and B's on all my papers. I never received many of those papers back, but when I did, I would find the grade and read the comments, which tended to perplex me rather than help. There was never the chance to revise any of the work I had submitted. As Elaine Maimon says, the professor was "the first and last person" to ever read what I had written.

What were the comments which so perplexed me? On my paper for Dr. Crosby, "Woodrow Wilson and the League of Nations," he wrote on the front, "B, The paper is certainly informative. You deserve credit for effort, too. You still need to work, though, on organization and composition. The writing is too bumpy— too uneven. Work on it!" What was I to do? How does one make one's writing less bumpy??? What on earth is "bumpy writing"? Although the comment was well-intentioned, it gave me no direction.

I even went to Dr. Crosby's office and he tried to help, but since he wasn't a bumpy writer, he couldn't quite figure out how to help me stop being one!

I think the sheer volume of writing I did in college helped me improve my writing skills. I found another paper I did a year after the League of Nations paper. It was much better organized and, I suppose, less bumpy. The paper was in a course I found to be much more challenging, and the topic was one of my own choosing, unlike the assigned topic in Dr. Crosby’s course. The difference may have been that I found the paper more interesting and engaging.

As I review papers written in graduate school, I still find comments about the organization and style of my writing. So, what finally helped me to write better? I believe the change came when I began my dissertation.

The process of writing shifted tremendously as I wrote this document. Many people read drafts and made suggestions, and I was allowed to make revisions based on their comments. It was the first time I had a “work in progress.” The comments were the comments one makes to colleagues rather than the comments which seem to justify the grade on a student’s paper. They gave me suggestions about how to improve the document, they asked questions if something wasn’t clear, they challenged me to improve with each draft.

Professional Writing

My lessons in writing have continued as a professional. One of the best learning experiences I have had was in the writing of a chapter on interest groups in New Hampshire for a recently published book with my colleague Bob Egbert. We divided the writing duties and then came together to edit and revise the chapter. We had colleagues read the chapter and comment on it.

We again revised as their comments came in to us. Then we submitted a draft to the editors of the book, and they made comments. We revised. The editors had problems coordinat-

ing all of the authors for the book, so as time ticked away, our chapter became dated. We revised. Reviewers for the publisher made comments. We revised. Proofreaders made comments. We revised.

This is the writing process professionals use. We, as professional writers, don't send in first drafts as completed works, yet that's what most of our students do when they write papers.

I was never taught how professionals write until I worked on my dissertation. I could proofread and make some grammatical corrections, but I never knew how to revise what I wrote. We were always warned to do our own work, so I was afraid to have friends "help" with papers. I didn't want to bore them to death, either.

The only examples I saw in my books were completed works, never works in progress. I despaired that my writing could never be that good. Perhaps our students despair that their writing will never be as good as the writing in the texts they read. I think we owe it to them to show how those texts and other professional pieces were written. The process is important. We must teach our students how our professions communicate ideas and research.

Peer Review: Modeling the Professional Writing Process

How do we teach our students to write as we do? I think one answer may be to create an environment which requires them to simulate the process we go through to have our writing published.

Elaine Maimon presented some wonderful ideas on this last June at the workshop she conducted for us. She gave examples of how her colleagues in a variety of disciplines adapted peer review techniques to fit the requirements of their own areas.

My Public Policy Analysis course is usually one of my

smaller classes, so I thought it might be a good place to try peer review. At the beginning of each new topic, I assigned an essay. The students brought their first drafts to class as a basis for class discussion. I added my own lecture material as we discussed the topic, and they revised their essays to incorporate this new information. After we covered three topics, I dedicated a 50-minute class to peer review. Students were given forms which asked them to think about what help they might need and then the reviewer answered these requests for help.

At the beginning of the first peer review session, we discussed the style of comments they should be making on each other's work. They were instructed not to rewrite other student's work. I used a series of models created by Roy Andrews of types of comments which are helpful in encouraging revision and those which discourage revision.

At the end of the semester, they had written and revised ten essays. They turned in a portfolio of all of the work they had done, and indicated which five essays they wanted graded.

The essays they wrote basically addressed the same kinds of essay questions I would have asked on exams. I feel, though, that they became so immersed in the information, by revising their own essays and by reading the essays of their peers, that this process may have been better than the traditional formal exam in helping them understand the material and remember it. They also had a paper to write on a topic of their choice and a presentation to give. The paper was subjected to peer review as well.

I believe that because of peer review the amount of learning increased on many levels. The students learned to revise their work along with learning the subject matter. They learned which comments were helpful to their writing process and which to ignore. They learned to make comments to others and that writing is not something you do without the

input of others. Roy Andrews and Robert Miller, who attended some of the peer review sessions, were also enthusiastic about the students' reactions and work. This has been an exciting experience to share with my students and colleagues!

I found the portfolios to be much easier to read than exams and their papers had fewer grammatical and spelling errors than usual. Their grades were comparable to classes in the past. Some really worked hard, others just did the minimum required. All of them discussed and thought about their writing processes extensively.

Student evaluations of the class were mixed. Several wanted to return to the exam format. I had problems with some students feeling that peer review days were days they could skip class. One of their biggest complaints was that they had no idea what their grade was until the last week of the semester. Most of them, however, were very excited and engaged by peer review, so I am encouraged! Many commented that they learned more about writing in this class than in their Writing class.

I am using this technique in another class this spring semester. Some changes were necessary, but I am pleased with the results from last semester. I have made attendance mandatory at peer review sessions for my class, and this time I am allowing them to turn in their portfolio for a preliminary grade before the due date. Though resistance to change is to be expected, I am convinced that peer review combined with portfolio evaluation is a valuable way to learn to write and write to learn. I wish my professors had used this approach when I was an undergraduate.