

## **Writing In the Foreign Languages Department**

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### **Writing Assignments in Beginning and Intermediate German**

*by Gisela B. Estes*

Creative writing is important in all my German classes. From the very beginning in my first year German classes, I assign short “Aufsatze” (compositions of 25 to 30 words) where the students are asked to describe their rooms, their favorite cars, a special friend etc., depending on the topic we cover at the time. Writing these phrases and words rather than only reading and saying them reinforces the learning of the vocabulary in context rather than memorizing a list of words, and the students are guided to use correct German grammar which helps to reinforce it. This, in turn, then improves the spoken language. I stress that students “*think*” in German and use the German syntax rather than thinking in English and translating into German. I encourage the students to write several drafts before they hand in their papers. Their papers are graded and handed back with comments and corrections. The students then have the option to rewrite their compo-

sitions for a better grade.

In the second year of German the “Aufsatze” (compositions) expand to include topics where the students not only describe simple things but also state their opinions and defend their positions. This is a very crucial time in their mastery of German. They are able to speak at an elementary level and are anxious to transmit their own thoughts. Their thoughts are, of course, in complicated English which they then want to translate verbatim into German. It doesn’t work. At the beginning of the semester I stress that compositions should be written in the most elementary style using very simple main clauses. From there we add inverted clauses and then dependent clauses. The students have to mark the subjects and inflected verbs in their sentences so that they become more familiar with the structure of the German sentence. It is apparent immediately when students think in English and translate because their German comes out awkward and strange. The papers are returned with corrections and comments and graded and the students may hand them in again for a better grade. I tried at first not to grade the compositions when they were handed in the first time but only after they were rewritten. However, I found that the students did not put much effort into their first paper (which was not supposed to be their first draft) if they did not receive a grade. By the end of the semester (the third semester of German at PSC) most students are capable of writing a fairly decent German composition if they stick to the basic vocabulary and grammar rules. Furthermore, the ability to write correctly slowly carries over to the spoken language. During the Intermediate German classes the vocabulary knowledge increases rapidly and the students are then able to communicate reasonably well and with a certain amount of confidence.

During the second semester of Intermediate German, the fourth semester at PSC, I increase the required amount of writing and rewriting. Students’ papers must be written on computers. Mistakes are marked and for the next draft the students have to

correct their errors on their own. Errors are marked again, this time with comments and some corrections. I sometimes use classtime and let students work in pairs to correct their work, which works very well. When the students hand in their papers the third time I correct everything. Students find the constant rewriting quite frustrating. In order to make this process more rewarding I decided to “publish” a certain number of their compositions in the form of a “book.” The students are told which of their compositions will become part of their book and only those have to be rewritten until they are perfect. The themes vary; first the students write about themselves; then they write about topics we discuss in class. Sometimes a composition is written with a certain grammatical structure in mind. The assignments include a poem after we study a certain poem in class. It is interesting to see the different ways the students create. The writing as well as the speaking improve tremendously over the course of the semester. Toward the end of the semester, students create a front page for their book, sometimes designed by one student, sometimes by several or all of them, depending on ambitions and talents of the students. I add a first page and an index and the big moment comes on the last day of class when the students receive their finished books. At this point all the struggle writing and rewriting “Aufsatze” becomes worthwhile and the students are pleased and very proud about their own German book.

Writing Across the Curriculum in the above described way is helping my students of German not only to become better writers but also better speakers of German. I also believe that this process of learning to write correctly in German will carry over to their English composition writing and later to projects they will do either personally or professionally.

## Promoting Writing Skills in Spanish

by *Barbara Lopez-Mayhew*

When students study a foreign language, particularly at the secondary and college levels, the acquisition of speaking and writing skills is by far more difficult than acquiring reading and listening skills. It is incredibly frustrating for them to be able to communicate orally or to write effectively in their native language, and then to be found speechless or unable to write a simple sentence in a second language because of limited vocabulary and grammar. If students are encouraged from the first day on to overcome their fear of seeming inadequate or "stupid" as they grope for a word when they speak, or when they write, their success in language learning will be greater. The student needs to be reassured that it is okay to make a mistake as long as an effort has been made to communicate and an attempt has been made to correct the mistake.

Aside from encouraging oral communicative skills, I highly promote writing skills at all learning levels of Spanish. Assignments are made at all stages of language acquisition, from very directed and short paragraphs at the beginning level, both directed **and** open written assignments ranging from one paragraph to a two-page composition at the intermediate level, to journal entries, short essays, and research papers at the advanced level.

At the beginning stage of learning Spanish, since vocabulary is limited and sentence structure with a correct use of grammar is very basic, students are usually encouraged to write directed sentences and paragraphs using set phrases and vocabulary that refer to certain topics and situations. For example, students will learn vocabulary about family members and physical descriptions, and then later be asked to describe their families. I strongly discourage students writing in their native tongue and translating, because inevitably the words chosen to be translated will be out of the realm of vocabulary just learned. After all, their Spanish grammar and vocabulary will be at a novice level in comparison

to the higher level of their native language. Also, the students are asked to write original scripts for skits to be acted out in class. These scripts are based on certain topics and situations selected from the textbook being used in class (for example, going to a restaurant and ordering a meal), and they reinforce any grammar and vocabulary studied up to and including the current chapter. Students are encouraged to be creative. But they are also reassured that they may imitate any sentence structures with a set vocabulary that they and the other students have learned in class in order to make communication more accessible. I usually edit the scripts, because it is essential that the students at this beginning stage learn correct sentence structure, use of grammar and vocabulary.

The intermediate level of college Spanish builds on a vocabulary and grammar foundation assumed to have been already introduced and taught prior to entering the class. There is much diversity in the students' capabilities since prior language courses in Spanish range from a full-year of beginning college Spanish to several years of language study at the high-school level. Students' writing skills also vary since the student at the intermediate level may be a first-year student or a senior! I have found that if students have a strong foundation in writing skills in their native language, then they will be more successful writing in Spanish. If students are familiar with the mechanics and concepts of writing a good composition or essay, then this will carry over into the second language.

Students' written assignments at the intermediate level of Spanish will vary from answering personal questions in complete sentences taken from workbook exercises, to tests and exams that may contain directed and closed-ended exercises, to more creative open-ended exercises using word banks or topics with use of specific vocabulary and grammar. I've taken a more creative direction with students imitating an Ode from Pablo Neruda "Oda al tomate," and writing their own poem, and critiquing a foreign film. This year they viewed two contemporary award-winning

films, “Camila” and “Como agua para chocolate.”

After I provide a brief historical and biographical introduction, the students view the films and write a guided essay of five paragraphs. The students are reminded that a summary of the film is to be avoided. Their essay should communicate to the reader their personal criteria of a good movie, how the movie rates according to that criteria, what the plot is and whether it is worth telling, if there is a moral to be learned or whether the film is solely for entertainment, their impressions of the actors and actresses, the scenery, the music, and the filming, and their reason for recommending the film or not. They not only need to express their opinion but need to reflect and explain “why?”

The students are encouraged and guided into writing a more sophisticated essay, using a variety of verb forms and tenses, such as past and future as well as present. The use of a Spanish/English dictionary is highly recommended as long as students remember to cross reference the words they are choosing, to be sure that the new words express the ideas they originally intended to convey. At the intermediate level, short and simple sentences can now be compounded into more elaborate sentences joined by adverbial conjunctions (for example *sin embargo*, *por consiguiente*, *asi que*) and coordinating conjunctions (*y pero...*). However, realistically, the more students are adventuresome and creative, the greater the chance of making errors. Therefore, I avoid grading the first draft of compositions and essays and provide students the opportunity to revise their work. I read and edit the essay and then pass it back to the student with a guide of symbols that I used on the essay, so that the student can identify the error and self-correct the essay. Generally I feel that the student can be graded on content and form by the third revision. On rare occasions, a student may have written an exceptional essay which can be graded after the second revision. The opposite has also been proven true where the student has reached a plateau in his or her writing, and due to lack of skill and time will not be able to improve the essay regardless of how many revisions made. Usu-

ally, the second revision will give an accurate indication as to whether the student has understood the errors and has shown enough interest and skill in improving the essay.

When students reach the advanced stages of foreign-language learning, they are encouraged to continue what they have begun at the intermediate level. There may not be an immediate advancement in their writing skills, but if continuity and a variety of writing assignments are provided, the students will feel more confident and become more proficient in their writing. In the third or fourth year of college Spanish, the writing assignments should vary according to the course objectives and material. In our Advanced Spanish Course the students will continue to work on grammar points, vocabulary expansion, and samples of literature, which they will have to reflect on. Again, compositions and essays will be assigned to expound on a certain topic, characterization, plot, etc. Students are generally required to keep a written journal on either specific topics, or a question that relates to plot, theme, characterization, etc. They may also write a personal reflection or opinion on an assigned reading passage. When I read a journal entry, I will put my red pen away and “attempt” to read my students’ written work with a focus on content, rather than grammatical correctness. On occasion I will underline a section or word(s) when my comprehension has been obstructed because of vocabulary and/or grammar misuse; and students are given a check, check plus, or a check minus depending on the overall quality of their journal entry.

At the more advanced levels of Spanish, students reinforce their grammar and vocabulary foundation by writing a research paper in Spanish. At this point, students are expected to have reached a proficiency level where they can research a topic, summarize and synthesize literary criticism, and apply information to a literary work. The students not only need to have a strong foundation in grammar and vocabulary, but should be able to create and support their own opinions, and be effective in communicating their thoughts by producing a lengthy written paper in

Spanish. They are continually encouraged to be creative and adventuresome, and to expand their communicative skills through writing. At the 400 level of Spanish, students who have reached an advanced stage will be able to write an extensive paper with relatively few grammatical mistakes, and will have developed their topic into a clear and well-structured paper. Again students' writing skills will vary within this advanced stage, and many will still need to focus on grammar and vocabulary as well as content.

I have found that if my students are encouraged to write, for example, whether it be a short paragraph on what they did last summer or a research paper on the portrayal of the woman in Spanish Drama, the students will overcome the language barrier and take the opportunity to develop their writing skills. They realize that although writing in a second language is a slower process than in their native language, being able to communicate in another language is quite gratifying. At first, the students will be challenged because of the inability to express what they are thinking. However, with time, practice, my reassurance and direction, they will develop adequate proficiency in the second language so that they will be able to communicate effectively by writing. After all, our goal in language teaching is to have students acquire capability in all four language skills, reading: listening, speaking and writing.

## **Writing in French**

*by Marie-Therese Gardner*

### **I. Beginning Level**

In beginning French, oral and listening skills are mainly emphasized; however, for complete and effective communication, students are introduced to the skills of writing.



The following are some writing assignments to introduce the students to writing in French.

A. Answer questions in writing using a five-to-ten word simple sentence to foster understanding as well as to practice sentence-level structures.

Example: Quel âge as-tu? J'ai vingt ans.  
*How old are you? I'm twenty years old.*

B. Build a twelve to fifteen word simple sentence, including appositives with proper punctuation.

Example: Qu'est-ce qui sépare la France de l'Espagne?  
Les Pyrénées, une chaîne de montagnes, séparent la France de l'Espagne.  
*What divides France from Spain?*  
*The Pyrenees, a mountain range, divides France from Spain.*

C. Form a complex sentence with relative pronouns.

Example: C'est un artiste doué. Il vit à Paris.  
C'est un artiste doué qui vit à Paris.  
*He is a talented artist. He lives in Paris.*  
*He is a talented artist who lives in Paris.*

D. Write about everyday happenings called, "Les petites communications," such as birthdays, birth and/or wedding announcements as well as holiday greetings. This leads the students to simple letter writing.

Example: a. Nous avons la joie de vous faire part de la naissance de notre joli petit bébé Joline.

*We are happy to announce the birth of our pretty baby girl, Joline.*

**b.** Tous nos meilleurs voeux pour la Nouvelle Année.  
*Our best wishes for the New Year*

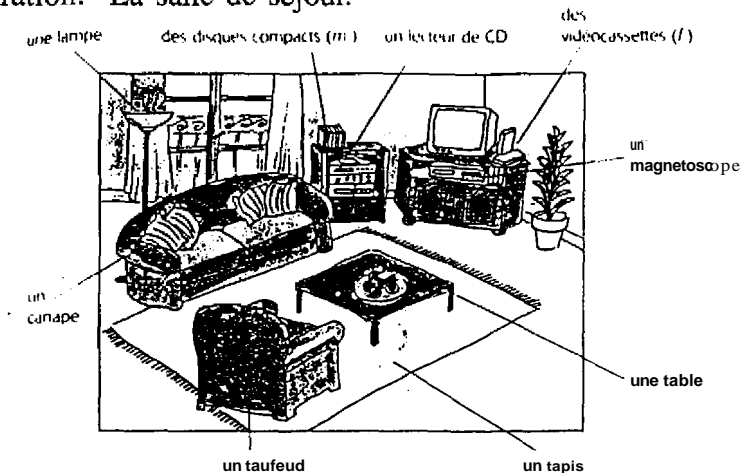
E. Create a short paragraph called, "la redaction," composed of a six-to-ten-sentence paragraph, using transitional words for clarity, pronouns and synonyms to avoid repetitions. Here are two examples of compositions used to achieve this goal.

1. At the early stage, description of content may be facilitated by using visual aids.

Example: You are to describe a room in your house. Choose the room you like best and tell us why.

*J'aime la salle de séjour chez mes parents.  
I like my parents' family room.*

Illustration: La salle de séjour.



Rédaction: Voici la salle de séjour chez mes parents. C'est une grande salle avec une porte-fenêtre qui donne sur un balcon. Au

milieu de cette salle, il y a un grand tapis gris. Sur le tapis, il y a un canapé, un fauteuil et une table, tous, couleur champagne. A côté de la porte-fenêtre, à droite, il y a un lecteur de CD, des disques compacts, un magnétoscope et des vidéocassettes auprès d'une plante verte. A gauche de la porte-fenêtre, il y a une lampe à pied. J'aime beaucoup cette pièce parce qu'après les cours, je me repose et j'écoute du jazz.

*Here is my parents' family room. It is a large room with a sliding door which opens onto a balcony. In the middle of the room, there is a large grey rug. On the rug, there are a sofa, an armchair and a coffee table, all champagne color: Next to the sliding door, to the right, there are a CD player, a VCR, and videocassettes, next to a green plant. To the left of the sliding door, there is a floor lamp. I like this room because after classes, I relax while listening to jazz.*

2. Formulate statements which lead to paragraph writing.

Example:           Je m'appelle Natalie.  
                          J'ai seize ans.  
                          Je suis née à Toulouse, France.  
                          J'habite Liancourt, près de Paris.  
                          J'étudie à Paris au lycée Louis Legrand.  
                          Je n'aime pas les sports.  
                          Je préfère étudier.  
                          Je veux être professeur de français.

*My name is Natalie.  
I'm sixteen years old.  
I was born in Toulouse, France.  
I live in Liancourt, near Paris.  
I'm studying in Paris at Louis Legrand  
lyceum.*

*I do not like sports.*

*I prefer to study.*

*I want to become a French professor.*

Rédaction: Je m'appelle Natalie et j'ai seize ans. Je suis née à Toulouse, France, mais j'étudie à Paris au lycée Louis Legrand. Je n'aime pas les sports mais j'aime beaucoup étudier. Je veux devenir professeur de français.

*My name is Natalie and I am sixteen years old. I was born in Toulouse, France, but I'm studying in Paris at Louis Legrand lyceum. I do not like sports, but I like to study a lot. I want to become a French professor.*

## **II. Intermediate and Advanced Levels**

In the Intermediate and Advanced French classes, the students are to actively engage in the art of writing by developing skills in a sequential and logical order, and are guided and challenged in progressing from moderately difficult to complex writings.

“Le compte rendu” is a general term which includes several different types of oral and/or written exercises; namely short and long resumes, themes and character analyses, as well as expressions of personal evaluation of selected readings, movies and/or plays. These exercises lead to the writing of a term paper in the advanced grammar and composition level.

In the intermediate as well as in the advanced levels “le compte rendu” is introduced systematically in order of difficulty. Its main objective is to teach the student how to compose a paragraph with clarity, fluidity, and coherence; the second is to learn how to be observant and precise; third to be sincere and authentic in their personal evaluations, and finally, to develop their own writing style using creativity to sustain interest. These exercises are read, examined, and discussed in class.

In both levels students are to practice the use of transitional words and sentences, simple and complex sentences, varied sentence patterns, selective vocabulary, and punctuation. These writings become more and more sophisticated in the advanced level.

### **III. Overview of Writing in French**

The students are asked to keep an up-to-date file on all their written assignments as well as their corrections. They are also taught to keep a viable vocabulary list as well as a glossary of sophisticated vocabulary; to avoid “les mots-pièges” (traps) i.e. cognates which appear similar but are of different meaning (for example, “proposer” means in French “to suggest” not “to propose” as in English); to observe grammatical and linguistic rules, and, most of all, to be organized in their thoughts to ensure fluidity and coherence in their multipurpose writings.

The students must constantly struggle to conceptualize in French, not in their native language, to labor arduously over a piece of writing for whatever purpose or genre assigned, to observe all the qualities and techniques in writing a paragraph, to accept constructive criticisms from peer and/or teacher evaluation, and to meet deadlines.

The teacher must create a friendly ambiance among students and himself/herself in which students strive to overcome the barrier between the target language and their own, to reinforce self-assurance, to encourage progress in their efforts, to display patience and understanding when confronted with frustration, to endure the endless task of correcting papers, to make meaningful suggestions in order to improve their writing styles.

Upon the students’ final achievement, there is a definite admiration between the students and the teacher filled with love, respect and jubilation, a self-rewarding satisfaction and accom-

plishment, and, finally, a well-deserved victory. Commitment and dedication create success.