



The Writing Process—Introduction to the Unit

A Writer Teaches Writing

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Donald M. Murray, reporter, writer, teacher, coach, died December 30, 2006, of heart failure. Five days earlier, *The Boston Globe* published what would be his last column, one that captured the spirit of a man who despite a lifetime of achievement never stopped saying—or believing—that he remained, at 82, a student of the writing craft he so loved. I was privileged to be present at the birth of that column twenty years earlier. But this is not what made his reputation, nor was it what made him a great writer, teacher, or coach.

I was a student in the University of New Hampshire's summer course for writing teachers in 1986. Little did I know when I signed up that my life as a writer and teacher would change dramatically with this six-week course. There were 25 of us in my class, all eager to discover new and better ways to teach what is often considered one of the most challenging tasks for an English teacher, but it was the teacher who transfixed us from the beginning.

A Pulitzer Prize-winning journalist—the youngest journalist to receive such recognition—Murray lived by a simple rule, a Latin phrase he kept close by his writing desk. "Nulla dies sine linea." Never a day without a line. That first day, he handed us each a piece of card stock with the phrase elegantly written on it. Twenty years later, I still have that paper, and I do my best to practice that rule as well.

We learned by doing. That is to say, Murray had us practice the writing process we were to teach our students so we would have personal experiences to share with them about what worked and what needs work when we write. Further, he modeled for us exactly what we were to do by sharing with us what he was going through to write what later that summer became the first few columns of his "Over 60" (later "Now and Then") column that appeared faithfully every Tuesday in the *Boston Globe* for the next 20 years. He showed us step-by-step what it took to bring a piece to the point of publishing. And he reminded us that if we are to teach writing, we must show our students what it is to write.

Chip Scanlon, a columnist for *Poynteronline* (<http://www.poynter.org/>), in his tribute to Murray, listed several truths Murray taught him about teaching writing, and about life:

- Never be afraid to admit you're human.
- It takes the greatest strength to admit you're weak.
- It takes the greatest courage to admit you're afraid.
- If a teacher asks a student to write, the teacher must write as well, for writing is the great leveler; students see that even the expert in front of the class struggles to make meaning with words. . . .





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- All writing is revision. . . .
- What you write is what you are capable of writing today.
- You are a writer by virtue of one action: you write.

The truth about teaching writing, is that it is difficult and time-consuming and frustrating. But also satisfying when one or (if you're lucky) more of your student rises to your challenge and actually follows the process to produce a piece to be proud of. Chip Scanlon and Donald Murray had it right. If a teacher asks a student to write, that teacher had better well be writing. And sharing their successes and failures with their students.

The information contained in this series of power point presentations and companion handouts is not original with me, except that I created the format for sharing. It presents the writing process as we have come to know it, thanks to writers and writing teachers such as Donald Murray, and is adapted from Prentice Hall's *Writing and Grammar: Communication in Action*, platinum level. I created the original presentations for my sophomore composition class of 2003, and found good success sharing the information this way. The students who faithfully followed process each time, from start to finish, dramatically improved their writing. Several went on to become the excellent writers every writing teacher craves. They have carried these strategies with them to college and have found college writing classes "easy" thanks to the wood-shedding they did in academy.

These presentations can be used one after the other, if you teach a straight composition class, but I recommend that you space them out as the work is not light, although the results can be extremely satisfying. They were designed for sophomores, but have been used by 7th-12th graders with relative ease (at least in the presenting and understanding).

I have not included examples of any of the essays. They are in the textbook I worked from, and I suspect most teachers will have their own favorites that are more easily shared than anything I might suggest. Working with what you know simplifies the teaching, a necessity if you have a full classroom.

The Progress Checklist and Scoring Rubric is meant to be used with each writing assignment. This will help your students accomplish all tasks without skipping any. That's the key. And that's the challenge.

Good luck. Have fun. If you discover any future Pulitzer prize-winning writers in your midst, send us samples of their work. We might publish them in future *Teacher Bulletins!*

