
Writing by Example: The Prose Models Approach Revisited

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I had a very difficult time writing my master's thesis. While teaching ESL on a little isolated Polynesian island, I received approval for my paper's topic. I was also directed that the paper should have five chapters: an introductory chapter; a literature review chapter; a methodology chapter; an analysis chapter; and a findings, conclusions, and recommendations chapter. Furthermore, each chapter was to have specific subheadings. For example the introductory chapter was to give background information, importance of the study, assumptions, limitations and delimitations, just to name a few. I thought that this would be easy to write since the skeleton was already provided. However, since I had neither seen nor written anything similar or on such a grand scale, I found it to be a tremendous task. The information and what I wanted to say were easy enough to find, yet organizing it into the proper expected manner was very difficult. It was not until I had reviewed several other master theses that I was able to catch the vision of what was expected of me.

On a much simpler level, oftentimes ESL students are told to write an essay. The essay should contain an introduction, body, and conclusion. I find that everyone of my students can repeat verbatim these three words. They can even describe in detail what accompanies each part of a good essay, yet when putting the pen to the paper, all the knowledge upstairs does not flow down the arm and through the fingertips.

Model writings have been used over the years to teach students how to write. Eschholz (1980) points out that models are often too long or too far beyond the ability of the student reading them to successfully imitate. Therefore, the use of models becomes a reading exercise rather than a writing practice. Eschholz further points out that "critics of the models approach are suspicious of imitation and see it as stultifying and inhibiting writers rather than empowering them or liberating them" (1980:24). He goes on to say, "Students must be permitted to discover their own writing problems" (1980:35). However, I find this to be the point at which students can often become frustrated. They have seen and know what is expected, but they still don't have the skills to develop a similar masterpiece without a guiding hand.

Watson-Reekie (1982) has a somewhat different view of the use of models. She writes, "If students can treat the model as a resource rather than an ideal, if they can explore it with each other as well as with the teacher, if they can comfortably compare their own products at various stages of composition with that of the

professional, then the alien product is truly involving them in original process.” I believe that using a suitable model at the students’ ability level can greatly enhance the speed at which learning the process of academic essay writing is obtained and perfected.

A parallel can be drawn to building a house. Each of us knows that it takes a plan to build a house. Furthermore, we know it takes hammers, nails, and wood. Yet given a plan, tools and materials, few of us could really build a fine home.

Now, on the other hand, if a skilled carpenter were building a home across the street with the same design as the one we wanted to build, we could cross the street at night and see how he put things together and copy them in building our own home. We could notice how the foundation was laid, followed by the walls and roof. Other important observations such as putting in the electrical wiring and plumbing before finishing the floor or sheet-rocking the walls would save us from completing our walls only to discover that we had to take them apart again to run pipes and wires.

It is through a step-by-step process that we learn to imitate the master builder. Of course, when the homes are completed, it will be obvious which was built by the professional and which by the amateur. However, with practice and time, building skills are refined and the amateur no longer has to copy each move of the master builder. The student approaches a level of creativity and distinction from all others, while holding to the basics of good home building.

This may be what many of our students need, an example to look at and follow step-by-step. One semester I did just that. My department publishes a collection of student essays written over the past semester. I simply used these essays as prime examples of what their teachers were looking for in a good essay. Since other ESL students had written them, I knew that these examples would not be beyond the reach of my students to mimic and improve upon.

On some of the days when writing was taught, we would read and analyze an essay from the collection. We would discuss such things as what made for a good introduction or a poor one. We would point out writing styles such as how the author used personal experiences or examples to build the body. We finished by looking for cue words that connected thoughts or directed our attention to a conclusion. For homework, the students mimicked the essay, keeping the same general topic and form but writing in their own words. Later the students were asked to write on similar topics without being tied to the model.

I could easily check to see if the assignment had been completed by scanning the essay, reading only the topic sentence and enough of the paragraph to see if the student had indeed followed the organized plan. I could stop there or go back and also check for grammar mistakes.

As a result of having my students pattern themselves after other students' essays, I found that they could more readily see and perform what was expected of them. I found great improvement in content and organization in both patterned and freely-written essays. Sentences and paragraphs seemed to flow more smoothly.

The process continues. Though my students can successfully compose an original simple essay, they still need guidance as their writing progresses into longer and more complicated works. I contend that this will best be accomplished by choosing, and appropriately using, models that will match their needs—of both process and product. It has worked for both me and my students.

References

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