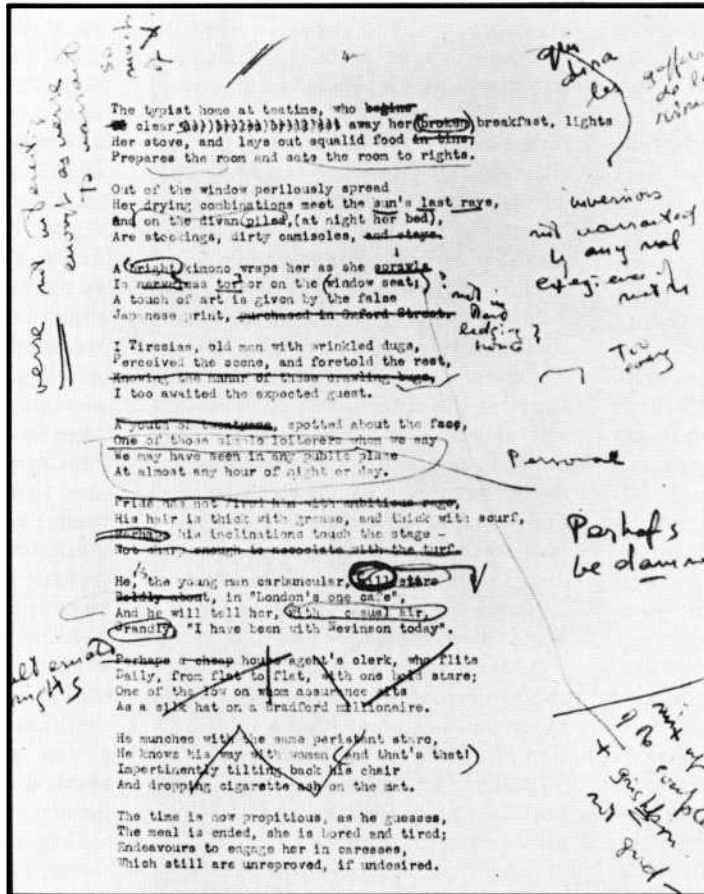


What Do Writers Do?

PART II

Can any college freshman be taught to write?
A national authority on composition offers
step-by-step instruction that is working at OU.



T. S. Eliot's manuscript revisions for "The Wasteland."

By MICHAEL C. FLANIGAN

Learning an art is not always easy, for often we are given the wrong advice or left to struggle on our own. But the work in writing over the last 10 to 15 years has given us a general model of the writing process that can be helpful to teachers. The model that follows is one that can be used in almost any writing class. Of course, the specifics of what goes on will have to be adjusted to the talents and knowledge of the

students, the kinds of writing being taught, and the nature of the audience who will read what is written. It is important to remember that the stages discussed here are metaphors for what happens in the mind, and we all realize how little is known about this dynamic entity. One purpose of laying out this model is to give some notion of what is possible in writing classes throughout Oklahoma.

Continued

WHAT DO WRITERS DO?

Writing begins with an idea, a notion, a feeling, a need to reach out to others in words. This impulse may be too indefinite or uncertain at first to be called a purpose. It will be a general, perhaps even a vague, direction that the writers care about pursuing and one that they sense may be worth pursuing. Writers usually begin with faith that if they follow their hunches things will eventually come together — all is tentative. At other times, however, writers may have ideas they want others to hear about, or they may have a beginning or an end of a piece in their minds that they have faith will fill out as they think and write. At this beginning stage, generally speaking, what writers don't have is material, although it may be ready to be tapped.

Often, almost simultaneously, another stage occurs. Whatever is written about will have a number of restrictions imposed on it. (Writers may place these restrictions on themselves — "I want to write a poem, a report, a parody, a novel, etc." Restrictions also can be imposed by others and occur as part of an assignment from a teacher, an employer, or the nature of the piece being written.) The restrictions not only include the form to be used (form may not be apparent until the writer has gotten well into the writing), but also include the audience the piece is being written for, the limitations of length (such as in publication), and particular conventions (based on the situation) that need to be followed. Further, the style, the voice or stance that writers believe will best achieve their ends, and any special kinds of organization additionally restrict their choices. (Of course, some of these considerations only will occur to the writers after they have finished the first draft.)

As a third stage in the process (which, again, may occur earlier), writers examine what they know about the vaguely defined topic. Such thinking will help them discover what areas they need to investigate and what investigative techniques they may want to use. At this point many writers start making lists, or

journal entries, or they may free-write to see if there is anything to their notions, feelings, or ideas, or they may make running notes, or (in rare cases) play with an informal outline. The purpose, of course, is to discover what they know and what gaps they may need to fill.

A fourth stage is gathering information. This may mean simply tapping the memory, as in narratives or in essays and reports, where writers know the material without the need of any formal research. Usually, however, writers will need to consult sources such as articles, books, reports, and other people (interviews). They also may decide to observe phenomena and take notes to add richness and detail. In some instances writers will conduct their own experiments to get information, or they may use surveys or questionnaires.

The goal is to accumulate an abundance of material so that writers can realize fully and support the ideas, arguments, and feelings that are the heart of the final piece. Material itself, of course, is not enough; it needs to be shaped by the personal voices of the writers as they create a unique and personal statement that is important to them. This personal commitment is essential if the piece is going to have life and be anything more than an exercise.

After writers have gathered sufficient information, the next problem is in formulating some kind of organization. This may be done formally or informally. Writers may make a general outline or simply may organize material in their heads. Some writers will sort note cards into separate bunches which follow some overall plan. Others will make lists of ideas or statements or sentences and use these to guide their writing, crossing out these entries as they move through their work and fill out their ideas. Some writers discover their organizational principles by writing, since organization sometimes is accomplished unconsciously or only semiconsciously. It is important to remember that organization often is achieved in the act of writing and not pre-shaped by a rational system like outlining. The language (with all its meanings, connotations and symbolic connections) that is used early in the

writing process both will shape what is to come and open up possibilities that originally are not known.

The process is organic, vital and open; it is not as rational, systematic and mechanical as some textbooks and psychologists would have us believe. While we may want to look for patterns, we need to remember that these patterns are afloat in individual seas made up of the amazingly particularized experiences, emotions, thoughts and perceptions that make each person a unique human being. As a result, though we may see patterns or stages, we should not lose sight of the individual richness that transcends them.

When writers feel they have what they need to do a draft, they begin writing with direction. This sixth stage actually may occur simultaneously for writers who write a sort of impromptu flat-out draft as a way of organizing what they know. Some writers, of course, don't write as quickly as possible to get their flow of thought on paper. Instead they write slowly, rearranging, changing words and phrases and sentences, deleting and so forth, until they have a draft that often requires little rewriting. Occasionally, writers will write and rewrite to such an extent as they proceed that when the final word is written the paper is finished. This kind of writer, however, is rare and usually is found only among highly experienced and knowledgeable writers.

For most writers the most important stage in writing is the seventh stage, revision. At this point writers become their own critics. They consciously try to see if meaning is clear, if language and ideas are appropriate to their audience, if the feeling that gave rise to the writing in the first place has come through, if the organization best serves their purpose, if the style matches their intent and their material, and if the whole piece has what could be called the right feel.

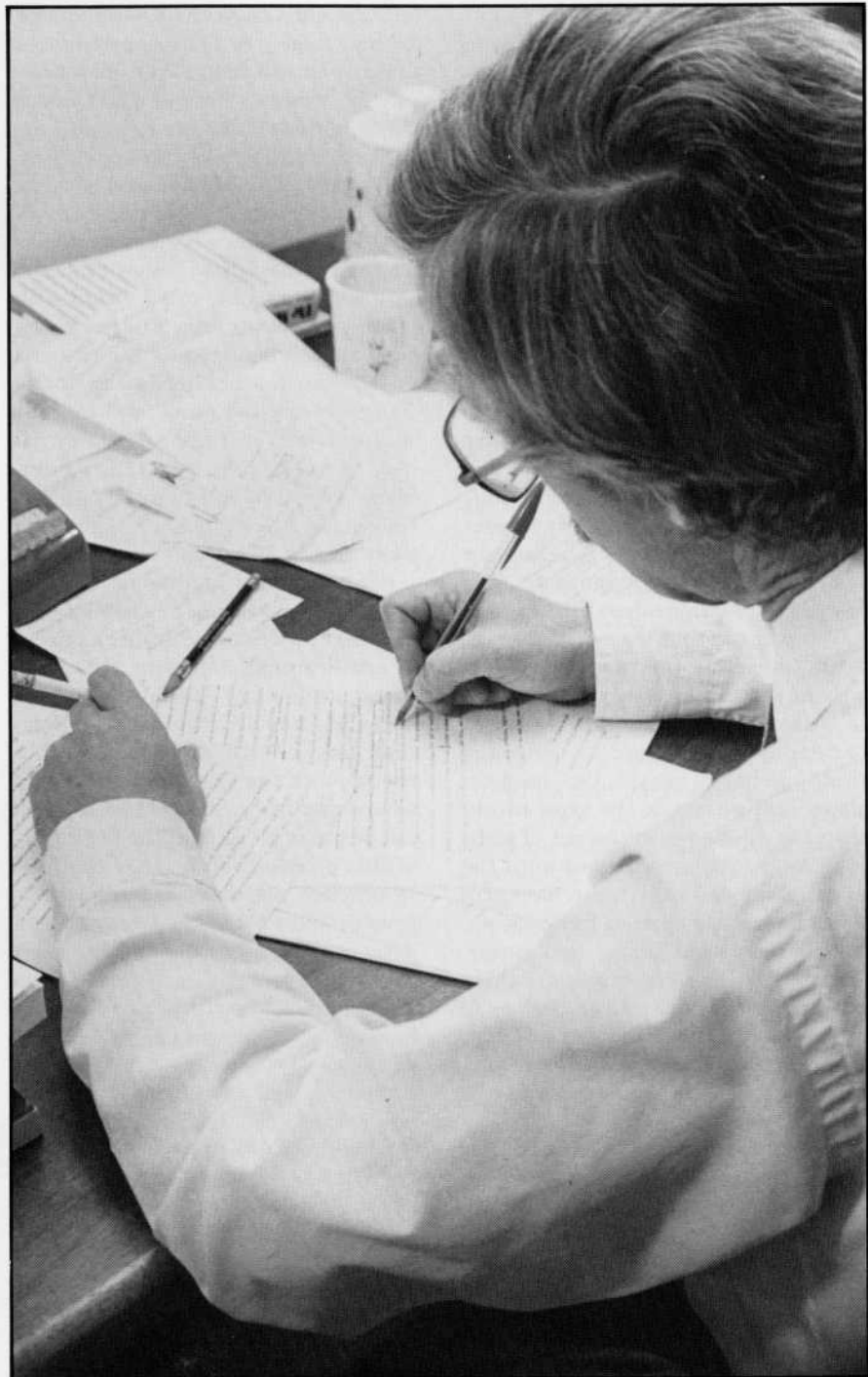
Frequently, writers will revise the same piece seven or more times. What is needed is time, because revision is a time-consuming process. Often writers find that at this stage they need to let the draft rest for awhile, so that they can come back to it with some distance and perhaps with some freshness.

The next-to-the-last stage in the writing process, proofing, is one that too many novice writers focus on too early. In proofing, writers fix on spelling, punctuation, and on grammatical and mechanical (including typographical) errors. This cleaning up gives the paper the best appearance possible. It does not contribute substantially to the ideas and feelings of what is written; it simply makes the paper look good and shows that care was taken at all points before, as Horace said, the word is sent forth.

Finally, real writers confer with an editor about what they have written. The editor may advise the writer, if the piece is to be published, to cut or expand some areas, to tighten the style, to rearrange parts, to clarify an issue and so forth. At this point "finishing" the piece and getting it into print becomes a collaborative effort. Writers and editors work together to make the best kind of publication possible. Editors are not *the* decision makers about changes. The task is to advise, to listen, and to share reactions and understandings.

In describing these nine stages (some teachers prefer to talk about five, eleven, or as many as fifteen stages), I have tried to show that they are not *linear*, following rigid, straight-forward stages. Writing is *recursive*; it moves forward, then backward, then forward again. We organize at many points along the way, just as we revise, re-research, re-edit. In fact, often all the so-called stages are operating at once. Writers simply are focusing momentarily on one or a few aspects at various points in the act of creating. But what is important about this general model of writing is that it can serve us in teaching. It reminds us that we can do more about teaching writing than simply to give assignments and teach grammar and usage.

At the beginning stage, for example, when students are searching for an idea or need to give clarity to ideas or feelings, a teacher can ask questions (*invention*, in Aristotle's terminology; *heuristics* in modern parlance) that allow students to discover for themselves a wide range of possibilities. The range of questions would depend upon the kinds of assignments students are working with.



Professor Michael Flanigan practices what he preaches for his freshman English composition classes at the University of Oklahoma – revision and more revision.

If they are writing a paper that requires them to do community research (i.e., How are people treated at the local jail? Do some students at the university receive special financial assistance and why? What kind of research will be carried on at the new Energy Center, and how will it benefit students and the people of the

state, country and world?), then we might ask questions such as the following:

1. Why do you care about X?
2. What do you already know about X?
3. Is there anything written about X?
4. Who would know about X?

Continued

5. What is significant about X?
6. Does the answer to No. 5 point to problems, needs, ideas that are larger than our local community? What are they?
7. Who else would care about X?
8. What conflicting points of view seem inherent in X?

Such a list of questions requires students to deal with their ideas on a personal level, to think about sources they could use, to think of audience, to associate a local problem with larger issues, and to figure out what is inherently significant about the idea or problem. Other heuristics are possible, and these have been discussed in detail in professional journals (see Richard Larson's "Discovery Through Questioning: A Plan for Teaching Rhetorical Invention," *College English* [November 1968]).

The point is that we can cause students to explore their own ideas and writing even before they have begun to write. At this stage students need to care about what they are doing and think seriously about the implications. And we can do the same sort of thing at all stages in the act of writing. We do not have to wait until the paper is handed in. We can have students do journal entries, free-writing, list-making, outlining and information-sharing. We can show them how to teach themselves and each other how to revise, and instruct them in the nature of proofreading and how it is done. And we can do this as papers evolve.

Let me give an example of how we can affect writing by intervening in one of its processes, the process of revision. (I will not lay out here the way in which all stages of writing can be explored in the classroom; that seems to me more than necessary for the purposes of this article.)

Typically, students are told simply to revise, and they usually think of revision as a cleaning-up process (i.e., attention to spelling, to making the paper neat). They do not think of it as rethinking, reformulating, reordering, reconstructing sentences to match their intent, and similar larger and important concerns. The main reason students have no firm sense of how to revise is because they have not been taught what revision is. To teach students how to revise, the in-

structor must show them what to look for and then give them opportunities to learn how to do it under guidance.

After students have thought about topics, gathered information and organized it, they should write their first drafts. This should be a serious, well-considered, comprehensive effort. Students make two extra copies for their editors (two fellow students who will work in a small group with them). A paper from a student in the class is used to introduce the revision guide. The teacher leads the entire class through the guide and has the students answer its questions in writing. At each point the students' answers are discussed fully in order to show students how to use the guide on their own.

After students have gone through this practice session, they begin revising their own and each other's papers in small groups, following the directions in the guide. When the revision sheet is finished, students discuss their answers. Of course the teacher checks with the small groups to help where necessary. Many students will not be great revisers at the beginning of this process, but, as they continue to practice the method, considerable growth takes place. They learn to understand what to look for in their own writing, and they learn ways of dealing with their problems and enhancing their strengths as writers. A typical revision guide for an expository piece might look like the one below:

1. Read the entire paper.
2. What is the paper's focus? What's it about? Two or three sentences.
3. How does the first paragraph function in the paper? Does it establish a setting? Explain the point of the paper.
4. How does the writer try to get your interest as a reader? Is a standard device used? Explain and illustrate.
5. Does the writer get to the topic without wasting time? Point to any parts in the first or second paragraph where the writer walks around the topic (simply spins wheels and goes no place).
6. Circle any material that doesn't seem to fit the topic or that adds nothing.
7. Does the paper stay with a

specific topic or is it too broad? Does it remain general? Explain.

8. Underline any sentences that are awkward, are difficult to understand, or that repeat ideas already stated.
9. Cross out (x) words that are unnecessary, vague, inappropriate, or otherwise bother you.
10. Make a brief outline of the paper and be ready to discuss how each paragraph and idea belongs or doesn't belong where it is in the paper. Look at the flow from one idea or paragraph to the next. Is it smooth or jarring or arbitrary?

Note that this guide asks students for detailed responses to each other's writing. It does not ask them only to think about problems, but requires them to summarize, draw relationships, underline specific points, and look at writing devices (transitions) that contribute to effective writing. Usually the guide focuses on writing concerns that have been discussed in class that pertain to specific kinds of writing. The guide, in other words, reinforces what has been taught in class and asks students to concentrate on what they have been taught.

Anyone interested in more explanation or more detailed work on teaching the revision process should see M. Flanigan and D. Menendez' "Breaking Away from Henry Ford: Two Models of Writing and Teaching and Their Implications," *Teaching Writing* (Summer 1981) and "Perception and Change: Teaching Revision," *College English* (November 1980).

The outline of the writing process and these few suggestions of how it can be examined in the classroom show what lies at the heart of some of the work we are trying to accomplish at the University of Oklahoma. Of course, we need to build a program; we need to continue our research, and we need to train excellent writing teachers. We cannot know fully how the mind and heart of the writer create the wondrous worlds that are evident in writing. But we continue to learn more about how writing is done and how to teach it. The commitment of the English department and the University is to expand our knowledge and improve our teaching so that students, through writing, will realize their fullest human potential.