

Magic Words: Writing as a Tool for Learning in the Humanities

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Writing can be a powerful tool for learning in the Humanities. When used well, it helps students clarify their thoughts in a quick, simple way, and it provides teachers with ready insight into how students are making sense of content. Writing is also a natural way to engage students who have a wide range of achievement levels, for it allows different students to participate in the same activity in different ways. Perhaps most importantly, it places control of learning in the hands of students themselves, so that they have a chance to construct their own ideas instead of simply reproducing what they encounter from teachers, texts, or other sources. When used this way, most students write easily and naturally.

That may not sound like a very familiar description of writing. Both students and teachers are more likely to think of writing as a difficult and time-consuming process, one that sometimes seems to require impossibly high standards. Many may associate it with drudgery, boredom, and the regurgitation of content that they barely understand. But it does not have to be that way. Developing a more positive and productive attitude toward writing requires thinking more carefully about its role in the learning process.

The Role of Writing in Learning

Writing is one of the most common tasks required of students at school, but it rarely lives up to its potential as a tool for learning. Most often, we ask students to write for one of two reasons: (1) As a summative assessment. We often ask students to write examinations, essays, or other somewhat lengthy compositions as a way of finding out how well they have learned what we intended. Here,

writing is a *product* of learning. (2) As a skill to be learned. In language classes, we teach students the mechanics of composition, and in content courses, we teach them to apply that to particular subjects—by writing a historical essay, for example. Here, writing is the *object* of learning.

Both of these are important reasons for having students write, but neither of them is centrally concerned with helping students learn content; they are more like by-products or auxiliaries of Humanities content. By placing writing closer to the center of the learning, though, we can make it both more natural and more effective. Rather than only being the product or the object of learning, writing should also be part of the *process* of learning.

This means giving students the chance to write quickly and informally as they are learning, or immediately after a lesson. It does not involve lengthy compositions, nor does it focus on correct spelling and punctuation. (Think of it as more like email—correct spelling and punctuation are nice, but we do not tell people we will not read their emails if they are not perfect.) If students get too bogged down in the mechanics of writing, the activity will cease to serve its purpose. The purpose of this kind of writing is for students to think about the information they have encountered, and to make it their own through the activity of writing (Britton, 1970; Langer & Applebee, 1987; Smith & Wilhelm, 2010). This is what *constructivism* is all about—students constructing knowledge by doing something with content. When students react to information through an activity, they construct their own understanding of it. Otherwise they are just memorizing ... or

forgetting.

Quick Writes

Any good lesson should include multiple important ideas for students to understand, and in the midst of the lesson it may seem that they understand them just fine. But without some sort of closure, these developing ideas may soon dissipate. Giving students a chance to write quickly about what they have been learning allows them to sift through their ideas and identify areas of both clarity and confusion, but without feeling the burden of producing an elaborate and polished composition. Through “Quick Writes,” they should come to a better understanding of the content of the lesson and become more aware of gaps in their understanding.

This quick and informal construction of knowledge through writing can take a number of forms. Students can be asked to keep learning journals, in which they write down their reflections on what they learn each day. In some classes, these may be completely unstructured: You simply ask students to write what they learned. More often, teachers provide enough structure to give students focus, but without posing “textbook type” questions that have single, correct answers. After studying British colonialism in Southeast Asia, for example, a teacher might ask students to answer the question, “What have you learned about the reasons for colonialism?” or “What have you learned about how colonialism differed in Burma and Malaya?” Answering these questions obviously requires students to show some mastery of the content, but it does not presuppose exactly which information they understood best or what was most salient to them. By keeping the question open-ended, it allows them to show what they *know*, rather than quizzing them to find out what they *don't know*.

Another popular format is the “3-2-1,” in which students write 3 things they've learned, 2 questions they have, and 1 thing they think will stay with them. This has the advantage of allowing them to pose questions about content

as well as to identify what they know, and this can both lead to a more critical and inquisitive stance toward their education, and provide the basis for later discussion. Yet another way of prompting students is to have them write whatever comes to mind in response to an important word or phrase from a lesson (*colonialism, immigration, globalization, or whatever the topic may be*).

In each of these formats, however, it is important to keep in mind that the purpose of writing is not for students to prove to the teacher that they have learned something; then Quick Writes become just another assignment. The purpose is for students to write *for themselves*—so they have a chance to think through what they have learned and clarify it in their own minds. Only then will writing be a tool for learning, and only then will students approach it more naturally. This assumes, however, that the lesson was worth learning in the first place. If it was, and if students were interested and engaged, then they will welcome the chance to quickly write about what they learned. If the lesson was boring or unimportant, then no clever writing suggestion will convince them otherwise.

Magic Words

One challenge in using writing as a tool for learning is making the prompt specific enough that students write something meaningful, but open-ended enough that they are truly writing what they understand, not what they think the teacher wants to hear. In my experience, the most effective way of achieving this balance is through the use of “Magic Words.” The process for using Magic Words is simple: At the end of a lesson (or at the end of a week, or a whole unit), ask students to write 1, 2, or 3 sentences about the topic. Let them write anything they want about the topic, anything at all...but require each of their sentences to include a word like *because, although, or whenever* (see Magic Words list). This gives students a chance to think through what they have understood from the lesson, and it does not limit them to any particular piece of content (except that it has to be related to the topic). At the same time, requiring them to use

these words ensures that their writing will focus on important relationships.

Magic Words are prepositions and subordinating conjunctions. They are called *magic words* partly because that sounds more exciting than *prepositions* and *subordinating conjunctions*. But another reason is that when students use these words, it magically increases the quality of their writing. Simple, mundane sentences become more complex and sophisticated when they include words and phrases such as *whenever*, *except*, and *in spite of*. Ask a student to write a sentence about Singapore's independence, and they are likely to write a basic and uninspiring statement such as "Singapore became independent in 1965." But ask them to write about the same topic while including the word *because*, or *although*, or *after*, and they'll write a more interesting sentence, with a more sophisticated idea behind it. Try it yourself: Right now, write a sentence about Singapore's independence, and include the word *although*. See what happens.

This is an effective way of learning content, because all these words focus on the kinds of relationships that are the heart of the Humanities—causal patterns, sequencing, chronology, motivations, contingency, interconnections, and so on. It is difficult for students to write a sentence with these words that does not show the kind of relationship that we'd like for them to learn. Yet the particular relationships that they write about are up to them. If asked to write a sentence with the word *because*, a student has to think through the information she has encountered in a lesson to find an instance when one thing caused another; if asked to write a sentence with the phrase *in order to*, she has to come up with an example of a motivation and its effect. Often, students will not have specifically thought about causation or motivation in the lesson until they have to use these words. That is what is meant by constructing knowledge through writing: By quickly writing a sentence with one of these words, students should come to understand the content better than they did before.

Using these words also works well because

most students understand them from a young age—usually by primary school. But even though they know the meaning of the words, they rarely use most of them in their writing. When they are required to, though, they have little difficulty. Although they might not normally use *in order to* or *whenever*, they can easily do so when encouraged to. Just ask the nearest child you see, "Can you make up a sentence with the word *whenever*?" She'll think about it a minute, and then she'll almost certainly come up with a perfectly correct and grammatical sentence. As a teacher, I have never encountered a student who could not do it, or who said it was too hard.

This activity is also effective because it allows students at a wide variety of achievement levels to participate in different ways. Every student will be able to write some sentence with *because*, but the depth and complexity of their sentences will vary from one student to the next. One student may write a sentence noting a very simple relationship, expressed in simple language, while another will produce more extended and detailed clauses that focus on fundamental or complex connections. That's as it should be: Different students learn different things, and this allows all of them to demonstrate their unique learning. But by requiring the use of one of the Magic Words, it ensures that everyone will address an important relationship, even if they do so in a simple way. This is an ideal way for students to show what they know, instead of what they don't know.

Practical Tips

The surest way for this approach to fail is to give students the list as a handout and tell them to use one of the words in a sentence. As with any instructional technique, students have to be taught to use Magic Words. In fact, they should not even see this list of words for a long time, if ever—the list is for you, not them. Introduce the words one at a time, with a new word every couple of weeks—you probably will not make it through the entire list, so choose carefully, and keep a running list on a chart in the room. Begin by asking students to orally give you a sentence using the

first word you have selected (*because* works well for starters), and take a few suggestions. Let them make up sentence on any topic, and don't worry if they get a little silly in the beginning—the point is for them to get comfortable coming up with sentences with a particular word. You may even want to have them practice on content-free topics for a few days; it only takes a couple of minutes, and the practice will pay off in the long run. (And occasionally students will not understand how to use some of the words at first, particularly if their English is weak.) Once they are familiar with the process, then you can start asking them to write about the content they're learning, and every week or two you can introduce a new word.

Particularly when you first start using Magic Words, it is good to put some of the students' products on the board or projector so they can see what good examples look like. A few students will initially write sentences such as, "I'm writing about life on the home front in WWII *because* the teacher told me to." You can point out that the sentence is correct, but then show examples of other students' sentences that focus on the actual content of the lesson, such as "Food was rationed because there was a shortage." Many students will also include the stem, "I learned that..." (for example, "I learned that fruit wasn't rationed because it would spoil."). Again, this is perfectly correct, but you can show them that the sentence is more effective when they omit the first part: "~~I learned that~~ fruit wasn't rationed because it would spoil." You can also explore the different ways in which Magic Words can be used within sentences, and have students practice examples of each: It is possible to say both "Women could work in factories because so many men were away at war" and "Because so many men were away at war, women could work in factories." This kind of practice does not take long, and it helps students see what you are after.

Conclusions

Writing has been around for thousands of years, so clearly it serves an important purpose in human society. Unfortunately, although

schools require a lot of writing, we do not always use writing to its best effect. But by thinking of writing as a tool for learning, we can increase its usefulness in teaching and learning, rather than worrying about forcing students to develop a lengthy and difficult product. Magic Words are one of the most effective ways of doing that: Students usually know what they mean, they have little trouble coming up with sentences, and using the words forces them to think through and clarify the conceptual relationships they have encountered during a lesson. To make it work, though, keep two things in mind: First, introduce the words one at a time, and give students practice using them; second, remember that students should be writing for themselves, not for you—that means it has to be quick, stress-free, and related to interesting lessons. Give it a try, and let me know what happens.

References

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Acknowledgments

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Appendix 1: Magic Words

about	as though	even though	since
above	because	except	so that
across	before	for	though
after	behind	from	through
against	below	if	to
along	beneath	in	unless
although	beside	in order to	until
among	between	like	when
around	beyond	near	whenever
as	by	now that	where
as if	down	of	wherever
as long as	during	on	while
as much as	even	past	with
as soon as	even if	rather than	