



YEARBOOK STAFF CREATE A CULTURE OF PRACTICE

BECOME BETTER WRITERS

“It’s not what you know, but what you can do.” This is a truism that underpins any sort of performance—playing the piano, executing a form in Kung Fu, lashing a drive from the tee with a slight draw—or crafting a well-written story. It seems, advisers might be overworking to help their staffs know about writing—instead of getting out of their way and letting them write. Advisers who care about copy understand that students need to know how to craft coherence into their stories, how to develop their ideas and how strong verbs lead to vigorous copy. But the adviser who is getting kids to actually produce vibrant copy is the adviser who is finding ways to build repetition into the culture of the pressroom. *Repetitio est mater studiorum*—Latin for “repetition is the mother of studies.” Ask any polished piano player, any practiced martial artist, any refined golfer, any accomplished writer. Repetition leads to excellence.

KEEP THE INSTRUCTION to a minimum, but build a culture of practice. All staff rooms have a culture of rites and rituals; it’s human nature to create that when people spend time together. Our rites of culture range from hanging unused pictures with gag captions, to naming computers so they actually become proxy staff members. I’ve been in staff rooms where the culture includes pajama nights or flag football games. But the culture of practice is another thing all together—and it’s at the center of any successful program. The culture of practice must be built around repetitions that further the craft, and it must be student centered, not adviser imposed. Practices become culture when the kids, not the adviser, teach them. Practices become culture when they take little policing. The trick is to have students practice regularly in ways that are not burdensome and do not interfere with the production of the yearbook. Here are some ideas to help build a culture of practice.

“READ AROUNDS” OF PROFESSIONAL COPY

The more students read the pros, the more they internalize the conventions of the pros. Have students bring in leads—only leads—they think are interesting and gather in groups of four. An editor should run the “read around” by saying pass every 30 seconds, at which point each group member should pass the lead to the right. After three passes, the lead should return to the owner. Give the groups 60 seconds to discuss the leads and choose the best of the group. Call on each group to read the best lead aloud and offer a brief analysis of why the group chose it. Have each student keep a portfolio of professional leads. That’s it—done in less than 10 minutes.

TWO-SENTENCE STORIES

The credit for this goes to Dr. William Spivey—and it’s one of the most powerful practices I’ve come across. I use this practice at all levels of my teaching. Spivey suggests professionals tend to use four syntactical structures over and over: the three-action sentence, the appositive, the participial phrase and the absolute phrase.



The **THREE-ACTION SENTENCE** employs one subject and three verbs: "The fish darted behind the rock, waited for its enemy to pass and swam away quickly."

The **APPPOSITIVE** redescribes or renames: "Nick, the cashier at Raleys, handed back change."

The **PARTICIPIAL PHRASE** uses "ing" words to add specificity, either as an opener to a clause or as a closer: "Bursting between the guard and tackle, the tailback scored the go-ahead touchdown."

The **ABSOLUTE PHRASE** works just like a participial phrase, but it uses a noun plus a participle—and almost always refers to a physiological part of the noun it's modifying: "The car chugged up the hill, wheels wobbling, tailpipes spewing oil into the sky."

The trick is to teach the staff one structure a week, have them write two-sentence stories on any topic they want using the mandated structures, and then read them back aloud. At first, call on every student; then after a few weeks, call on only three or four.

I always start with the three-action sentence and put the following model on the board to imitate: Sentence One (open structure) "The golfer stepped to the tee." Sentence Two (three-action sentence) "He studied the shot, fingered his short irons and slipped a seven iron from his bag."

The next week I'll add the participial phrase as an opener for the first sentence, and keep the three-action in place for the second: Sentence One (opening participle) "Cupping his hands around the bill of his cap, Tiger studied the putt." Sentence Two (three-action) "He stalked to the ball, firmed his stance, and rolled the Nike down his line."

To teach the absolute, I'll use the same sentences, but point out that the difference between the participial phrase and the absolute phrase is the noun that comes in front of the participle: Sentence One (absolute phrase) "Hands cupped around the bill of his cap, Tiger studied the putt." Sentence Two (three-action) "He stalked to the ball, firmed his stance and rolled the Nike down his line."

After three or four weeks, my copy editor comes in at lunch on Tuesdays and puts a model two-sentence story on the board, using any combination of structures she wants. When the staff walks in, they imitate the structures, my editor calls on a few at random to read aloud—and off the class goes about its real business.

STYLE IMITATION

This is the creme de la creme of creating a culture of practice for writers. Find a short piece of professional copy—one of the weekly leads is easiest—and copy it onto an overhead. Try to get the staff to articulate and catalogue stylistic features that make the copy cool. Then have every person in the room imitate the piece as closely as possible as if he or she were writing about something in high school. Here is a lead from ESPN Magazine (a terrific magazine from which to study voice) that I always use to introduce this exercise:



Check out that Internet athlete. That's him boarding the bus, gym bag slung over one shoulder, laptop case hanging over the other. Inside that leather case is the life he once handed over to his sport. The family he kissed goodbye that morning. The friends he can't reach from the road. The hobby that used to wait until season's end.

I try to get the staff to articulate exactly what gives this piece voice. Usually they identify the repetition of the word “the” followed by a specific item on a list of things from his life which the athlete has downloaded onto his laptop. Some bright student usually spots the absolutes doubled up in the second sentence. All the students agree that starting with “check out” is important. Now it’s time to imitate the structure by using something from the high school experience as the content. Here are some student examples:

Check out the Editor in Chief. That's him emerging from the yearbook office commonly known as the bomb shelter, network cables held in one hand, proofs in the other. Those two items are symbols of his dedication. The frustration caused by a broken server and fallen network. The hours spent poring over proof after proof. The lost weekends spent fixing work from his staff that doesn't care.

Check out that teacher. That's him walking from the teachers' lounge, cup of coffee in one hand, leather briefcase in the other. Inside that briefcase is the reason he teaches. The jumble of essays he grades—all on the same topic. The lesson plans for another three periods. The five papers that need to be photocopied. The grades waiting to be posted for 25 anxious teens.

WRITING IS THE ULTIMATE PERFORMANCE (well—perhaps just after golf), and excellence can come only from a culture of practice that emphasizes doing—and doing. The truth is, the real world doesn’t value what you know—only what you can do. If only I could show up at the golf course this weekend with my buddies, show the starter all I know about the golf swing, and record the lowest score before we play. But—as it turns out—I’m fighting a wicked hook at the moment. And in the real world, if I want to shoot the lowest score this weekend, I know where I’ll be this evening. The driving range. Maybe if I open my stance just a little . . .

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