

Reading to Write, Writing to Be Read

by Vicki Spandel

In his book *On Writing*, author Stephen King states that writers “must do two things above all others: read a lot and write a lot” because “There’s no way around these two things that I’m aware of, no shortcut” (p. 145). We read, he says, “to experience the mediocre and the outright rotten” because “such experience helps us to recognize those things when they begin to creep into our own work.” We also read “in order to measure ourselves against the good and the great, to get a sense of all that can be done” (p. 147). In short, we read to write, because reading informs our own writing process. The more we read, the more diversely and effectively we read. The more we pay attention to what we read and how it’s put together, the more likely it is that our own writing will be clear, organized, and compelling.

Notice the important assumption embedded in this premise, however: The writer must be a careful and thoughtful reader in order to notice the content, the form, the conventions, and the wording that offer clues about what to do or what to avoid. Only when we teach our students to read with awareness do we help them build a bridge to writing. To better see how this works, it helps to examine how much the processes of writing and reading have in common.

Writing and Reading: Before-During-After

With a few ingenious exceptions, good writers do not simply sit down and begin composing a novel—blank page to brilliance. Instead, they draw from life’s experiences to find personally important topics, then shape them to suit the needs and interests of an audience. In short, they follow a process. They begin with prewriting and then move through drafting, revising, editing and proofreading, and finally publishing and presenting. While good writers surely bend the writing process to suit their needs, most, by and large, follow this general before-during-after kind of sequence.

Before writing, they think, react to life, and play with an idea in their heads. Reading often plays a vital role in this warm-up phase. In “A Writer’s Bill of Rights” (2002), Laura Benson talks about poet Georgia Heard, who keeps a full library of favorite authors and poets right by her reading desk, where she can reach for them and use them as mentors and inspirational guides. Their voices prompt her own work. During the process, writers draft, rewrite, read what they’ve written to themselves, and revise some more. They think about who their audience is and what will speak to them. Many share their writing in some way, depending again upon readers for feedback—questions, suggestions, encouragement. After writing, they reflect, consciously thinking what they could do differently next time, sometimes subconsciously absorbing lessons learned. They also learn that process must match purpose. A humorous story about hiking in the mountains is quite different from an informational piece on the Great Barrier Reef. Purpose affects every phase of the writing process—as it does with reading.

The *Reader’s Handbook* program (Great Source Education Group, 2002, 2003) is based on the premise that, like writing, reading is process-based. Anyone who has ever spent time browsing through a bookstore knows that experienced readers do not pick up any old book and plunge in randomly. They explore, they test, they sample. Good readers are tasters. They nibble at bits of chapters and sample poems or first lines, checking out the flavor.

Like the writing process, the reading process has before, during, and after stages. Before reading, good readers set a purpose: “Why am I doing this?” A college student looking for particular information about Shakespeare may explore ten books in the span of half an hour, combing through tables of contents, chapter titles, and annotations. Two aisles over, another reader has decided to purchase a mystery novel because she has lost herself in the world of the book and consumed the whole first chapter nonstop. Her purpose is different; she’s reading for pleasure, not to cram for a test.

Good readers also preview the material to be read and set a plan for reading. Previewing could mean skimming for main ideas or just to get a sense of the scope, length, or difficulty level of a text. Planning is anything that gives a reader a strategy for attacking a text—perhaps deciding to read critically, to use graphic organizers, to summarize, or to take notes. Notice how much like prewriting this portion of the reading process is.

The During Reading stage of the reading process parallels the drafting part of writing. During reading, readers keep the purpose for reading in mind: to prepare for a test, to solve the mystery, to catch up on the news, or to find out what Aunt Lois is doing in Chicago. They also make personal connections, creating an internal dialogue: “This is just like the time . . . I remember when . . .” Readers who make connections are more likely to remember what they’ve read (and often form an emotional attachment to the text); this is why we come back to writers with strong voice. Voice fosters connections.

After reading, readers take time to reflect on what they’ve read. They monitor their comprehension and ask basic readers’ questions, “Does this make sense to me? What did I learn from this? Did I get all the information I need?” The answers to these questions often prompt a next post-reading step: rereading. Not many people, of course, read the weather report over and over so as not to miss a single detail. A medical student, though, is likely to read a technical paragraph on bone density several times, especially if diagnosing a patient. Finally, readers make an effort to remember a reading. They jot down some notes or talk about it with a friend. Notice how closely this reflective part of the reading process parallels what a writer does in revising, editing, publishing, presenting, and reflecting on his or her work.

Reading Like a Writer: Building Bridges

Good readers read actively. They notice the qualities of what they read—which pieces are lively and engaging versus relatively voiceless, or which pieces answer a reader’s questions and which leave the reader confused. Active reading is a major focus of the *Reader’s Handbook*. Readers are encouraged to mark up text by highlighting or underlining, to visualize and predict as they read (Can I picture this? What will happen next?), to use sticky notes or marginal notes for asking questions (Why is this character doing this? Why did Lewis and Clark ever agree to this trip?). Readers are also encouraged to take notes or make sketches—such as diagrams or lists—to help them recall what they have read and to make sense of it. As they do so, two things are happening.

First, they are skillfully processing the text in order to understand and learn from it. In addition, though, they are expanding their skills in reading like writers. Somewhere in that reader’s mind is a consciousness that says, “This is full of information—and it’s actually fun to read. I know who Lewis and Clark are and what motivated them to head west. I can picture the journey in my mind.” Then—this is the bridge-building part—the reader/writer begins to think how to use what has been learned to improve his or her own writing:

“When I write my report on Alaska next week, I should include details like this to make things clear for my reader. I should write information in an order that’s easy to follow—the way this writer did. Maybe my usual humorous voice isn’t right for a report, but at least I can make it sound lively—like this piece.”

The *Reader’s Handbook* program encourages students to follow the reading process, regardless of whether they might be reading a textbook or a website, or preparing for a test, or reading a novel for pleasure. They’re encouraged to set a purpose, preview, and plan (Before Reading), to read with purpose and make personal connections (During Reading), and finally, to reflect, reread if necessary, and try activities to help them remember what they’ve read (After Reading). Throughout, readers are encouraged to take charge of their own reading process, to realize that they have control. To a challenged reader, who finds reading a daunting task, it is a comfort to know that he or she is not just adrift on an open sea; there are charts and a compass to consult. A small thing like previewing the table of contents or chapter titles, making notes to keep focused, or listing questions to guide rereading can make a difference.

Writing Traits—From the Reader’s Perspective

If we truly want students to read in order to write, we must ensure that our reading instruction encourages them to focus on those elements of a written piece that make writing effective. Trait-based writing, a proven method for helping students become stronger writers, is based precisely upon this idea: identifying the qualities that skilled, experienced readers believe make writing successful. It is quite accurate to say, in fact, that six-trait writing is a reading-based program, for it depends on the use of models to illustrate how writing works.

The six traits most readers look for in any piece of writing are ideas (clarity, thought, support, and detail), organization (internal structure), voice, word choice, sentence fluency (rhythm and flow), and conventions (mechanical correctness as well as the use of textual conventions such as bold type or graphics). The entire six-trait writing approach is based upon the philosophy of putting what you learn as a reader to work in your own writing. Each of the six traits is incorporated into the *Reader’s Handbook*—only from a slightly different perspective. Through the handbook, students approach text samples as readers. The hope is that they will not only strengthen their reading skills but also apply what they know as writers.

Reading and writing for ideas. Trait-based instruction emphasizes the importance of a central idea and strong support, which might be provided through facts, anecdotes, detailed description, and so forth. In the *Reader’s Handbook*, students focus on these same elements from a reader’s point of view. They look for the subject and main idea in a paragraph or longer piece of text. They discover that the main idea is often expressed in a topic sentence and that this sentence could come at the beginning, middle, or end of the piece. They also learn that topics and main ideas are sometimes implied or stated subtly, rather than outright. They practice identifying and highlighting details that support the main idea as well. When a reader has practiced identifying main ideas and details, it is a fairly simple leap to creating writing that makes a point—and to thinking (during revision), “I need more detail to support my message.”

Getting inside organization. Organizing information is a challenge for most writers. Starting as a reader can make dealing with this trait easier. The *Reader’s Handbook* walks students through a wide variety of organizational patterns: time order (chronological

order), location, order of importance, cause and effect, comparison-contrast, and others. Because students are encouraged to actually mark up texts and diagram these patterns, they get “inside” them. They can picture how each structure works and see how parts are connected. Seeing the organizational structure of a text laid out in diagram form is like seeing the skeleton of an animal; it shows vividly how the whole thing hangs together. Diagramming takes the mystery away. So a writer who has fallen into the habit of organizing almost everything chronologically now has the confidence—and the know-how—to attempt other options.

Particular lessons help a reader/writer cope with a specific trait. For instance, one of the hallmarks of good organization is a strong lead. The *Reader's Handbook* shows students exactly how a good lead works, inviting a reader into a story or article by answering who, what, when, where, why, and how kinds of questions and engaging the reader's attention. After working through this lesson, a student is more likely to notice leads in other things he or she reads, and then to consider the effectiveness of the lead in whatever he or she writes.

Students are also shown, step by step, how to use reading tools, such as an Argument Chart, Character Map, Inference Chart, Main Idea Organizer, Fiction Organizer, Plot Diagram, Timeline, Website Profiler, and Story String. Each adds to a reader's critical ability to analyze and track information and provides a key tool useful in organizing information during writing. A Story String or Plot Diagram, for instance, helps make a long or complex plot manageable by giving the reader a way to visually follow what is happening in the text. Readers may actually graph a story once or twice on paper. Then, while reading other stories, they simply picture that Story String, mentally filling in the main events of the plot, because using a reading tool has taught them to think in this way. Later, as students write stories of their own, the mental image of the reading tool guides the flow of the writer's words. The writers continue to think like readers, always asking, “Is this easy to follow? Does this make sense? What should come next?”

Recognizing voice. Students read for voice throughout the handbook, analyzing tone in editorials and arguments, separating fact from opinion, and considering point of view and style in fiction. They also explore the use of voice in drama and poetry, particularly focusing on use of connotation, exaggeration, mood, tone, and dialogue. Often, teachers wonder how to teach an element as elusive as voice. “Isn't it like responding to personality?” they ask. “How do you teach students to have personality?” Well, of course, you don't. We can teach students how to express the voice that's already within each of them through the very devices and tools so well illustrated in the *Reader's Handbook*. A student looks at the dialogue within a drama, for example, and discovers that when characters speak, we learn who they are and how they think. Dialogues and monologues take us as close to a living, breathing character as we can get in print, so knowing how to use these techniques helps the writer project a strong voice.

In exploring the various writing samples throughout the *Reader's Handbook* (and there are literally hundreds), students will also realize—especially with a teacher's guidance—that voice (or organization or word choice) changes with form and purpose. The voice of a poem is not likely to be the voice of an informational article or news report. It's not so much that one has *more* voice, as is often supposed. Rather, it's that the voices shift, in much the same way that a person speaks one way to an ailing grandmother and another way to a rowdy, obnoxious friend. Voice, like any key element of writing, must be altered to suit the writer's purpose. Reading models and seeing how they function in context is one of the best ways for readers to learn this very powerful writing lesson.

Noticing and collecting words. Teachers have long believed that students who read the most have the strongest vocabularies. If this is true, it follows that students who read with purpose and strategy expand their vocabularies at an even faster rate, giving them a deeper well from which to draw in creating text. The *Reader's Handbook* asks students to read with this kind of purpose, not simply encountering words, but creating personal vocabulary journals, recognizing context clues that hint at word meaning, getting inside analogies, and collecting favorite words and passages. Students learn how to recognize key words and phrases and appreciate rich and precise language. Teach these techniques, and the whole world of print opens up for the student, like one giant vocabulary book.

Reading to build sentence fluency. Poetry and drama sections also deal with the rhythm and flow of language. The handbook emphasizes the power of reading aloud, not only to discern meaning and help tune in to voice but simply to enjoy the sound of words used well. Students who read aloud are teaching themselves fluency. Students who make a habit of reading aloud are more likely to hear the flow and rhythm of words as they write and to appreciate variety in sentence length and style. Further, they're more likely to actually read their writing aloud during the writing process—perhaps the single most effective way to check fluency, clarity, and voice. What the eye misses, the ear often catches with ease.

Expanding the world of conventions. When most of us think of conventions, we think of punctuation, spelling, paraphrasing, and grammar. In fact, the concept of conventions is far bigger than this, including the use of visual illustrations such as maps, graphs, or pictures; organizational indicators such as heads and subheads, bullets, numbers, or indented lists; and textual modifications, such as the use of italics, bold type, or variations in font.

Readers look for these things for several reasons. A map or other visual illustration may support, clarify, or expand information presented in the text. Organizational indicators guide a reader through the text, charting a path to follow. Textual modifications may direct a reader's eye to key words or facts or points of emphasis. How important is it for a reader to decode these little signs and clues? Well, it's comparable to handing a driver in a foreign region a roadmap—along with a symbolic key showing what various unfamiliar road signs might mean. It unlocks hidden meaning. Textual clues that we may take for granted could mean the difference between a student's understanding a history lesson and not knowing which came first, the Civil War or World War II. It could mean the difference between solving five geometry problems correctly and not having a clue what the concept of volume is all about.

In writing, we spend a great deal of time teaching mechanical conventions. We spend almost none teaching textual conventions. Perhaps we should. Think about the organizational power we put into student writers' hands when we show them how to use subheads to identify shifts in topic, bold type to spotlight key words, italics to show emphasis, and a chart or map to support text.

The Catch

Nothing, absolutely nothing, takes the place of being in the position of a reader for helping a writer understand the frustrations of coping with unclear ideas, jumbled organization, flat voice, misused words, monotonous sentences, or unedited conventions. At the same time, good writing shows students the world of possibilities for reaching an audience. There's just one catch: We must teach students to read with a writer's eye. The *Reader's Handbook* shows us the way. Students first learn to read with insight and attentiveness, and then deliberately use what they learn to create text that draws readers in. What we are saying to students as we make this connection is simply, "This time around, you are the audience. Next time, you play to the audience." As Stephen King says, "Constant reading will pull you into a place . . . where you can write eagerly and without self-consciousness" (p. 150). Skilled, experienced readers are more likely to write with confidence—even daring. Teach a student to love reading, and you might just wind up with a writer as well.

References

Benson, L. (Spring 2002). A writer's bill of rights. *Colorado Reading Council Journal*. 13, 17.

King, S. (2000). *On writing: A memoir of the craft*. New York: Scribner.