



# A TEACHER'S GUIDE TO ORGANIZATIONAL STRATEGIES FOR THINKING AND WRITING

**BILLIE F. BIRNIE**

A TEACHER'S  
GUIDE TO  
ORGANIZATIONAL  
STRATEGIES FOR  
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WRITING

**WRINKLES IN TEACHING:  
A SERIES OF GUIDEBOOKS FOR TEACHERS**

A *wrinkle* is “a useful piece of information,” and one dictionary illustrates that by saying, “Learning the *wrinkles* from someone more experienced saves time.” In the case of teaching, it also promotes faster, more effective student learning, it prevents unnecessary and frustrating bouts of trial and error, and it results in greater satisfaction with one’s work. The “someone more experienced” is Billie Birnie, who taught successfully in elementary, middle, and senior high schools and then went on to observe and teach hundreds of teachers and, eventually, to write about her observations and experiences. Her books, designed for both elementary and secondary teachers, are short, practical, and down-to-earth conversations about the craft of teaching. *Organizational Strategies for Thinking and Writing* is the third in the series. The first was *Successful Classroom Management and Differentiated Instruction*, also by Dr. Birnie, and the second was *Practical Parenting and Learning Disabilities* by Susan Maynard. Other topics to come:

- Cooperative Learning
- Critical Thinking
- Assessing Writing Skill

Readers are welcome to suggest additional topics for the series. Suggestions should be sent to Rowman & Littlefield.

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*Billie F. Birnie*

ROWMAN & LITTLEFIELD

*Lanham • Boulder • New York • London*

Published by Rowman & Littlefield

A wholly owned subsidiary of The Rowman & Littlefield Publishing Group, Inc.  
4501 Forbes Boulevard, Suite 200, Lanham, Maryland 20706  
www.rowman.com

Unit A, Whitacre Mews, 26-34 Stannary Street, London SE11 4AB

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British Library Cataloguing in Publication Information Available

**Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data Available**

ISBN 978-1-4758-1404-0 (pbk. : alk. paper)

ISBN 978-1-4758-1405-7 (electronic)



The paper used in this publication meets the minimum requirements of American National Standard for Information Sciences—Permanence of Paper for Printed Library Materials, ANSI/NISO Z39.48-1992.

Printed in the United States of America

# CONTENTS

PREFACE	vii
ACKNOWLEDGMENTS	ix
INTRODUCTION	xi
PRELIMINARIES	1
The Writing Process	1
What Students Must Know about Sentences	3
What Students Must Know about Paragraphs	4
What Students Must Know about Essays	5
How Modeling Works	6
The Use of Response Groups	7
How to Use the Rest of This Book	9
THE STRATEGIES	13
Chronological Order	13
Spatial Organization	15
Topical Organization	18
Comparison	20
Contrast	22
Comparison-Contrast	24
Question-Answer	26
Traditional Narrative	29

## CONTENTS

Point-Counterpoint	31
Extended Analogy	32
APPENDIX A: TEACHING THE ORGANIZATIONAL STRATEGIES	35
APPENDIX B: SEAGRASS AND SILVER: A LESSON IN MODELING RHYTHM AND RHYME IN POETRY	39
REFERENCES	45
ABOUT THE AUTHOR	47

# PREFACE

**F**ran Claggett demonstrated the concept of “modeling” in one of the early years of the Glazer-Lorton Writing Institute in Miami, Florida. The term *modeling* in this context means imitating the style of another author by substituting your own words but retaining either the same parts of speech (*close modeling*) or the same overall structure (*loose* or *near modeling*). Having already experimented with this process as a teacher of English as a Second Language (we called it “pattern practice” then), I was once more impressed with its power for broadening one’s repertoire of writing skills. I began to collect and compose passages that illustrated various ways to organize and express ideas—passages that could be used as models, or mentor texts, of those strategies. I was motivated not only by the prospect of sharpening my own thinking and writing skills but also by a desire to counteract the climate in many schools that promotes only one formula for writing.

The first time I used the models in a professional development session, one of the teachers asked where he could buy the book. I told him there was no book, just a small collection of examples. Since then, others have asked the same question. This book is a belated and, I trust, still welcome response.

Billie Birnie  
Alpine, Texas  
July 2014



# ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

This book has been taking shape over many years, and its development has been nourished by a number of people. Chief among them are the following:

- Dr. Eveleen Lorton, mentor, friend, professor emerita of the University of Miami in Coral Gables, Florida, and co-founder of the Glazer-Lorton Writing Institute in Miami, Florida, for her constant support and inspiration;
- Fran Claggett, nationally recognized author and consultant, whose demonstration of modeling reawakened my interest in the process;
- Two groups of teachers who first tested the assignments in this book and who responded with enthusiasm and encouragement: elementary and secondary teachers who attended the Writing Institute, and English and social studies teachers in Monroe County, Florida;
- Sister Suzanne Cooke, former headmistress of Carrollton School of the Sacred Heart in Coconut Grove, Florida, and now Head of the Conference of Sacred Heart Education in the United States and Canada, who commissioned three series of seminars that focused on the strategies in this book;
- The seminar participants: Sister Margaret Seitz, assistant headmistress; Heather Gillingham-Rivas and Paola Consuegra, directors of the intermediate and primary schools, respectively; and teachers Shaune Scott, Rob Pollock, Patti Bruno, Margie Nunez-Ismael, Julia Cornett,

## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

Lourdes Aguiar, Maritza Fernandez, Maria Bernal, Anna Cristina Cammarano, Christie Diaz, Cristina Fano, Lizette Gomez, Maggie Jones, Iris Kovacs, Jessica Lamp'l, Nina Obregon, Cristina Pelleya, Lissette Ruiz, Natalie Eskert, Brittney Hernandez, Maria Jones, Louris Otero, Anna Peraza, Briana Tateo, and Monica Viola;

- Colleagues who gave me permission to use their writing as models: Donna Tobey, Head of the Lower School, Palm Beach Day Academy; Jeanne Sanford, former coordinator of social studies, Monroe District Schools (now retired); and from Carrollton, Ms. Gillingham-Rivas, Ms. Fano, and Ms. Otero;
- The published authors whose work provided some of the models: Count Philippe Paul de Ségur (and the translator of his book, J. David Townsend), S. C. Gwynne, Barry Lopez, Fitzroy McLean, and David Mitchell;
- Fran Ginsberg, who allowed me to describe her use of response groups;
- Joanie Cobo, who read the manuscript and offered valuable suggestions; and
- Vice President and Editorial Director Tom Koerner, Associate Editor Carlie Wall, Assistant Editor Christine Fahey, and Production Editor Melissa McNitt of Rowman & Littlefield, who provided editorial assistance.

I am grateful to all of those people for their contributions to this effort.

Two colleagues whose untimely deaths robbed the educational community of their leadership also influenced my thinking: Zelda Glazer, cofounder of the writing institute that bears her name, and Norma Bossard, who succeeded Zelda as director of language arts in the Miami-Dade County Public Schools.

Finally, I wish to thank my husband, Richard, who has supported this work since its inception. He read the manuscript after every one of the numerous revisions and offered many insightful suggestions for its improvement.

Billie Birnie  
Alpine, Texas  
July 2014

# INTRODUCTION

This book is for teachers of academic subjects that require written expression. It will help you take your students from wherever they are on the ladder of writing and thinking skills to mastery of the rigorous standards established for today's students. Just as teachers relatively recently realized that all teachers are teachers of reading, they are now beginning to recognize that they are also teachers of writing—because writing is the visual expression of thinking, and thinking is every teacher's domain.

The book contains three major sections: some *preliminaries* that will prepare you and your students for the process of modeling, instructions for *how to use the rest of the book*, and ten models of *organizational strategies*, each illustrated with at least two passages of mentor texts. The first six models are the basic patterns of organization: chronological, spatial, topical, comparison, contrast, and comparison-contrast. The last four are less well-known patterns that offer a variety of approaches to thinking and writing: question-answer, traditional narrative, point-counterpoint, and extended analogy.

Each of the ten patterns is illustrated by mentor texts appropriate for secondary students, college students, and adults. The first eight patterns also include two additional mentor texts, one for writers in the early grades and another for writers in the middle grades. Those examples will also be useful with students of any age who are just beginning to write or who are just learning English.

## INTRODUCTION

Following the description and examples is a summarizing table that names each of the strategies and tells what it does, when to introduce it, appropriate prewriting strategies, sample transitional words, and sample writing tasks that use the pattern.

The book concludes with a bonus: a lesson on modeling rhythm and rhyme in poetry.

It may be that some of your students who read widely and already write well would not benefit from the practice this book provides. If you have such students, they should be allowed to develop their writing and thinking skills without being required to follow specific patterns of organization.

# PRELIMINARIES

**T**his section offers some essential information that will pave the way for successful use of the strategies that follow. Whether you teach elementary or secondary students, you will want to use the writing process with them; ensure that they know the basics of sentences, paragraphs, and longer compositions; understand how modeling works; and know how to work with classmates in response groups.

## THE WRITING PROCESS

The writing process involves several stages. They may or may not occur in the same order for every writing task. Rather than being linear, the process is recursive, with stages overlapping and often recurring. So, although each stage is described below in the order it usually occurs, writers should be aware that the order may change with the demands of the task at hand.

*Prewriting.* This stage involves thinking about the writing ahead, perhaps choosing or narrowing a topic; selecting a point of view, approach, or framework for presenting the subject; and even thinking about details, anecdotes, or images that will develop the subject. Activities that frequently occur during this stage are reading selections that contribute to the writer's grasp of the subject; viewing films, DVDs, or pictures that deal with the

topic; jot-listing, clustering, or mapping ideas; and talking to other people about the ideas.

*Planning.* The planning stage, while still “prewriting” in the sense that it usually occurs before the actual writing, involves recording a plan for the finished piece. The plan may be as formal as an outline or as informal as a list, a diagram, or a map to guide the writing.

*Drafting.* In the drafting stage, the writer creates a flow of thought, connecting ideas into phrases or sentences on paper and perhaps, if the plan works, moving directly to paragraphs or even chapters. The writer is not preoccupied with correctness at this point; it is more important to get the ideas down on paper than to maintain adherence to the plan or to be concerned with mechanical aspects of writing such as spelling, punctuation, or capitalization.

The purpose of this stage is to put words on paper, to create text. Until the text exists, there is no “writing,” no matter how much you have thought about your topic. The result of drafting may be simply a free flow of ideas or it may be a fairly coherent draft.

*Revising.* By revising, the writer makes the piece better. Depending on the condition of the draft, this stage may require anything from Band-Aids (refining word choice, amplifying a detail or two, or combining sentences) to major surgery (reordering chunks of writing, filling gaps left by the drafting, or deleting whole sections). In this stage, the writer asks, “Does this passage convey the intended meaning?” Reading the piece aloud, asking for responses from others, or leaving the passage alone for a time and then seeing it afresh are techniques that aid revision.

*Editing.* By editing, the author (or editor) makes the writing mechanically correct. In this stage, attention turns to the details of variety in sentence length and structure and the conventions of language: spelling, punctuation, capitalization, and standard usage.

*Sharing.* In this stage, the writing reaches its intended audience. If the composition fulfills its purpose, this stage concludes the process. However,

as pointed out earlier, sharing is not only the final stage; it may be useful as well when the author is prewriting, planning, and revising.

All of that being said, the writer (and the teacher of writing) must remember that writing is a highly individualized process that manifests thinking and that not only is it different for every person, it may change with every writing task for the same author.

## WHAT STUDENTS MUST KNOW ABOUT SENTENCES

Every sentence requires five things: (1) a capital letter at the beginning, (2) a punctuation mark at the end, (3) a subject, (4) a predicate, and (5) a complete thought. The three punctuation marks that can be used to end sentences are a period (.), a question mark (?), and an exclamation point (!). The *subject* is who or what the sentence is about. The *predicate* tells what the subject is or does.

If you have not written a sentence, you have written either a *fragment* or a *run-on*.

A fragment is a group of words that does not make a complete thought. A fragment may be corrected by one of two ways: (1) add words or (2) subtract words.

A run-on is two or more complete thoughts, punctuated incorrectly as one sentence. A run-on may be corrected by one of four ways: (1) Separate the thoughts with a period. (Remember to start the new sentence with a capital letter.) (2) Separate the thoughts with a semi-colon (;). (3) Connect the thoughts with a comma and a coordinating conjunction (e.g., *and*, *but*, *or*, *nor*, *for*, *yet*). (4) Subordinate one of the thoughts with a subordinating conjunction (e.g., *when*, *if*, *because*, *although*, *since*, *unless*).

Extensive reading of good literature imbues the reader with an understanding of these structural characteristics so that they are automatically incorporated into written expression. Students clearly need guidance in

selecting good literature from someone who understands the difference between good and mediocre prose.

Teachers should also recognize that effective writing often breaks traditional rules. Consider, for instance, Virginia Tufte's enlightening book, *Artful Sentences: Syntax as Style*, which offers hundreds of examples of effective sentences, many of which defy convention. While the basic rules of sentence structure can provide a foundation for beginning writers, they should not become a straitjacket.

## WHAT STUDENTS MUST KNOW ABOUT PARAGRAPHS

The traditionally structured paragraph involves six components. The *topic sentence*, frequently the first in the paragraph, tells both what the paragraph will be about and what the author will say about that subject. It is followed by *supporting details* that elaborate on the subject. Details may be facts, incidents, reasons, examples, statistics (often taught with the use of the acronym FIRES), or a combination of those.

In a longer paragraph, details are often linked by *transitional devices*, words or phrases that help the reader shift from one idea to the next. Transitional devices may be the repetition of key words, the use of pronouns that refer to key words, or linking words or phrases such as *however*, *although*, or *next*. Details are presented in some kind of logical arrangement, such as time, place, or importance, to give the paragraph *coherence*, or logical order (or, as Patrick O'Brian says in *Treason's Harbour*, "flow, cohesion, natural sequence" [p. 235]).

It is important that all of the sentences in the paragraph develop only what is predicted in the topic sentence, staying within appropriate boundaries and thus establishing *unity*, or a sense of oneness. A traditionally structured paragraph often ends with a *clincher sentence* that summarizes the details, restates the main idea, or simply concludes the paragraph satisfactorily. The use of all six components will ensure a well-organized paragraph; it is up to the writer, then, to be sure that what is said is significant and interesting.

## WHAT STUDENTS MUST KNOW ABOUT ESSAYS

The traditionally structured essay, often called the “chain paragraph essay,” is simply an expanded version of the traditionally structured paragraph. The first paragraph, or *introduction*, which includes the thesis statement, or controlling idea, is analogous to the paragraph’s topic sentence. Succeeding paragraphs form the *body* of the composition, just as the details form the middle of the paragraph. The *conclusion*, or last paragraph of the essay, acts the same way the clincher sentence does for the paragraph, providing a satisfactory ending to the composition.

Paragraphs are arranged logically, in the order predicted in the introduction, to achieve *coherence*: They are linked appropriately through *transitional devices*; and they fulfill the “promise” of the thesis statement, achieving *unity*.

Mastery of the traditionally structured essay, coupled with abundant knowledge of the subject, has contributed to academic success for countless students. This format serves well on timed assessments, standardized tests that require essays, and in high school and college classes that require compositions. However, the structure of the essay alone cannot compensate for a lack of knowledge about the topic; good writing demands both substance and structure.

*Organizational Strategies.* Organizational strategies are different ways of developing ideas effectively through language (either spoken or written). Some of the most common are comparison, contrast, definition, emphasis (order of importance), analysis of process, and logical reasoning. Other strategies are question-answer, point-counterpoint, extended analogy, and traditional narrative. The serious student continually works to build a repertoire of strategies. (Kelly Gallagher offers these additional strategies in his book *Write Like This: Teaching Real-World Writing Through Modeling and Mentor Texts*: Express and Reflect, Inform and Explain, Evaluate and Judge, Inquire and Explore, Analyze and Interpret, Take a Stand/Propose a Solution.)

*Tone.* In writing, *tone*, or attitude, is the author’s attitude toward the subject. The more adept an author is at making that attitude clear, the more tone contributes to the success of the composition and the clearer the “persona,” or voice, of the writer. Tone has almost infinite variations, from humorous to neutral to sober, from friendly to objective to scathing, from informal to sophisticated. As with organizational strategies, the more attitudes an author can adeptly assume, the more choices for successfully conveying meaning to a reader.

*Style.* Style is the way in which the author uses language. A journalistic style, such as that used by Ernest Hemingway, is straightforward and economical. A more elaborate style, chosen by authors such as William Faulkner, uses long sentences, abundant description, and oblique approaches. Young writers will want to examine different styles used by professional writers and also experiment with different styles for different purposes.

*Range of Vocabulary.* A writer’s *range of vocabulary* is determined both by the number of words available for use and the precision with which those words are employed. Again, as with organizational strategies and attitudes, the wider the range, the better the writing will be. A writer with a narrow range reuses a small number of words and finds difficulty in being precise or sometimes uses words incorrectly; a writer with a wide range adds precision, imagination, figurative language (such as metaphor, simile, personification), freshness, and depth to the composition.

## HOW MODELING WORKS

Modeling is one of the most effective paths to improving writing skill. It enables the novice to write sentences, the more advanced student to write paragraphs, and even the most able writers to broaden their range of skills.

Two kinds of modeling are available: (a) close and (b) near, or loose. (Fran Claggett discusses both at length in chapter IX of her book *Teaching Writing: Craft, Art, Genre.*) Close modeling demands that the writer reproduce exact grammatical structures, using the same number of words in the

new sentence as in the model. For instance, if the pattern sentence is “Birds fly,” the new sentence might be “Flowers bloom” or “Dogs bark.” The pattern, in this case, requires a plural subject, an active verb, and a simple subject-predicate sentence.

Near modeling, on the other hand, allows the writer more latitude: A near model of the same sentence could be any simple subject-predicate structure, such as “My mother cooked” or “The sun is shining.”

The exercises in this book ask for near modeling. Their purpose is not to constrain the writer by demanding exact fidelity to every word, but rather to expose the student to patterns of organization. Neither the grammatical structure nor the number of words is prescribed. On the contrary, for each strategy, at least two examples are offered, and those examples often vary in length and structure.

## THE USE OF RESPONSE GROUPS

One approach to teaching writing in a traditional classroom setting is the use of response groups. If you wish to use that approach, these guidelines may be helpful.

- If possible, the group should be from three to five in number, and it should be stable throughout the completion of the exercises. As students work together on their writing, trust develops, responses become more helpful, and improvement gathers momentum.
- If there is a wide range of writing skill in your class, the group should contain members of different skill levels.
- Everyone in the group must participate in every meeting.
- The piece of writing under consideration should be read aloud to the group, preferably by the author.
- The author is encouraged to ask for suggestions about aspects of the writing that are especially challenging.
- Members of the group are encouraged to ask the author clarifying questions about the writing.