

Peter Smagorinsky
1608 Chestnut Lane
Norman, OK 73072

Reading/Writing Connections Learning from Research

Judith W. Irwin
University of Connecticut

Mary Anne Doyle
University of Connecticut

Editors

IRA
International Reading Association
Newark, Delaware 19714

How Reading Model Essays Affects Writers

Imitating exemplary models is among the hoariest methods of learning to write, dating back to the Greek academies where students learned rhetoric by memorizing the orations of the masters and practiced and advocated by such luminaries as Ben Franklin:

[John Collins] took occasion to talk to me about the manner of my writing; observed that, though I had the advantage of my antagonist in correct spelling and point...I fell far short in elegance of expression, in method and in perspicuity, of which he convinced me by several instances. I saw the justice of his remarks, and thence grew more attentive to the manner in writing, and determined to endeavor an improvement.

At about this time I met with an odd volume of the *Spectator*.... I bought it, read it over and over, and was much delighted with it. I thought the writing excellent, and wished, if possible, to imitate it. With this view I took some of the papers, and, making short hints of the sentiment in each sentence, laid them by a few days, and then, without looking at the book, try'd to complete the papers again, by expressing each hinted sentiment at length, and as fully as it had been expressed before, in any suitable words that should come to hand. Then I compared my *Spectator* with the original, discovered some of my faults, and corrected them.... By comparing my work afterwards with the original, I discovered many faults and amended them; but I sometimes had the pleasure of fancying that, in certain particulars of small import, I had been lucky enough to improve the method or the language, and this encouraged me to think I might possibly in time come to be a tolerable English writer, of which I was extremely ambitious [from *The Autobiography of Benjamin Franklin*].

Franklin's experience with the *Spectator* seems to prove this to be an effective learning method: He identified the elegance and articulation of good writing and reproduced these in his own expression. Teachers who employ this method assume that their students can perform in the same way—that they can assimilate production procedures by studying products.

This chapter begins by reviewing historic use of the strategy of reading “model essays” to promote better writing. Next I look at the rationale for this approach and review the use of models to promote learning in other areas. Following sections examine criticisms of and research on the method, including my own research on how it affects the writing process. Finally, I discuss effective ways of using models in composition instruction.

History and Rationale

The practice of reading model essays to learn writing skills can be traced to antiquity. *Progymnasmata* (“writing exercises”), by Hermogenes and Aphthonius, provided both rules for and models of writing forms; it “went through an astounding number of editions, in both Greek and Latin versions” (Corbett, 1965, p. 543). Corbett traces the influence of these texts all the way to 16th-century Europe, labeling the tradition “formulary rhetoric.” While other strategies have competed for primacy over the centuries, the imitation of model essays has endured as an instructional approach. Following the decline of the “classical” period in the 19th century, “rhetoric courses in the schools gradually assumed a new orientation—the study of the four forms of discourse: exposition, argumentation, description and narration” (Corbett, p. 566), with instruction focused on studying and imitating masterly renditions of these forms.

This orientation has persisted through to the present irrespective of the recent shift in attention toward the processes involved in writing. A survey by McCann and Smagorinsky (1988) found that although many texts are now starting to present writing as a process—albeit a simplistic one consisting of prewriting, writing, and revision—they do so in a discrete section while retaining an emphasis on the study of model essays. Only a handful of professional books, such as the National Council of Teachers of English TRIP series (Hillocks, 1975; Johannessen, Kahn, & Walter, 1982; Smagorinsky, McCann, & Kern, 1987; Smith, 1984), effectively relate process to form, and these publications tend to reach a limited audience of teachers instead of having widespread use among students.

The field of composition is not unique in its assumptions about the pedagogical soundness of studying models. Psychologists have investigated the effects of this approach in a variety of areas and have found that under certain circumstances studying models can be instructive. Strupp and Bloxom (1973) studied the effects of modeling psychotherapy sessions and found that certain types of clients—those whose expectations about the sessions were different from the reality of them—could benefit from watching a model of a therapy session before participating in one themselves. The researchers caution that the effects of a model depend on the learner's background knowledge and skills. In this case, the learners—patients with no experience in group psychotherapy—were unaware of the sessions' formalities and benefited from observing a film of others involved in therapy.

On the other hand, lack of appropriate background knowledge may prevent learners from being able to follow the model. Bransford (1979) gives the example of a theoretical physicist modeling a mathematical proof that is clear to other physicists but incomprehensible to most of us. Strupp and Bloxom (1973) argue that the problem is far more complex than whether models do or do not promote learning; rather, we must consider individual learners' characteristics and the nature and sophistication of the task we are asking them to perform. Without content knowledge, a study of forms is unhelpful. Modeling seems to work best when learners have the appropriate content knowledge but lack a structure for representing it.

The primary assumption behind using models in writing instruction is that students will see how good writers organize, develop, and express their ideas. This is particularly helpful if students are learning to write forms with distinct features, such as argumentation. Students are then expected to imitate the writing presented in the models. The problem educators face is that few students are blessed with the insights and abilities of Ben Franklin; instead, we must help students with different amounts of skill and motivation. We must, therefore, ask how we can use this approach to benefit the writing of *most* students.

Pros and Cons

Paul Eschholz (1980) is one of the few authorities in recent years to defend the use of models in composition courses:

Certainly few people will take exception to the general rule that one good way to learn how to write is to follow the example of those who can write

well.... Professional writers have long acknowledged the value of reading; they know that what they read is important to how they eventually write. In reading, writers see the printed word; they develop an eye—and an ear—for language, the shape and order of sentences, and the texture of paragraphs. The prose models approach to the teaching of writing holds that writers can develop and improve their writing skills through directed reading. Teachers who use this approach believe that one of the best ways to learn to write is to analyze and imitate models of good writing systematically. Such study, they feel, exposes students to important new ideas and to the basic patterns of organization in non-fiction prose as well as to other specific strategies or techniques that all good writers use.

Eschholz goes on to describe a three-stage teaching method for one type of writing: (1) Read a "classic" model to learn how to write a comparison/contrast essay; (2) analyze the features of the model, focusing on organization, thesis, paragraph structure, coherence, logic, exactness, and unity (this analysis might include practice at imitation); and (3) write a similar type of essay.

Students benefit from such instruction, says Eschholz, by learning the traditional rhetorical modes, becoming better readers, learning what good writing is and applying this knowledge to their own writing, and learning topic selection by using models as "theme starters." Students who study model essays can eventually improve their own writing:

When provided with a steady diet of the best contemporary non-fiction, they come to appreciate what all good writing has in common.... If students are doing a good deal of writing while they are reading, it is not long before they are reading like writers.... Consciously or unconsciously students begin to collect their own models of good writing (pp. 28-29).

Criticism of the approach of reading models to improve writing falls into several areas. One blanket criticism is that the study of a product simply cannot *teach* a writing process. According to Murray (1980), "The process of making meaning with written language cannot be understood by looking backward from a printed page. Process cannot be inferred from product any more than a pig can be inferred from a sausage" (p. 3). This curious analogy does little to illuminate *why* Murray feels that models do not work. In an earlier work, Murray (1968) is more specific, charging that models are irrelevant to writers' real needs. A model, he says, "only vaguely illuminates a

particular kind of writing problem relevant to the student's own growth in composition" (p. 220).

Other criticisms of form-oriented instruction have echoed this concern. Perhaps the most famous and vituperative attack along these lines comes from Emig (1971), who writes as follows:

A species of extensive writing that...deserves special mention is the five-paragraph theme.... This mode is so indigenously American that it might be called the Fifty-Star Theme. In fact, the reader might imagine behind this...Kate Smith singing "God Bless America" or the piccolo obligato from "The Stars and Stripes Forever."

Why is the Fifty-Star Theme so tightly lodged in the American composition curriculum? The reason teachers often give is that...this theme somehow fulfills requirements somewhere in the real world.

This fantasy is easy to disprove. If one takes a constellation of writers who current critical judgment would agree are among the best American writers of the sixties, can one find a single example of any variation of the Fifty-Star Theme? (p. 97).

These criticisms come from the early days of the movement toward "process" instruction, when Murray and Emig attacked the notion of any sort of external constraints on writing, particularly those imposed by teachers. In the face of widespread, slavish submission to teacher-prescribed form, their reaction was important, but in retrospect it appears extreme. The five-paragraph theme, while not practiced by the "best" essayists in their mature work, does teach certain organizational principles. Teachers assume (perhaps incorrectly) that students will transfer these principles to more sophisticated writing. The assumption is a logical one, however; after all, the critics themselves use these same organizational principles in the very articles that decry the structure.

Murray argues that writing in established forms does not promote growth in composing ability. This claim seems to deny that writers engage profitably in narration, description, argumentation, and so forth. One might argue convincingly that writers rarely produce compositions in the exact forms of the models, and that modes overlap too frequently to justify their discrete study. It seems odd, however, to reject the study of models altogether on this basis. In this chapter, for example, I have organized my ideas according to a conventional model (without knowledge of which I probably could

not publish in this medium), and use "standard" modes of writing such as definition, argument, narration, description, and compare/contrast. In engaging in these processes, I have profited from observing examples—the many research reports and articles I have read—of how others have engaged in them. My study of models is only *one* of the ways in which I have learned to produce academic writing, part of a repertoire of communication strategies for participating in this particular discourse community. If, however, my experience is even roughly representative of what many writers go through in learning particular conventions, then the outright rejection of using models to teach writing is unwarranted.

Other critics have focused more profitably on the relationship between form and content. In the reading models approach, form precedes content. Judy (1980) argues that " 'form' in writing has traditionally been presented as something independent of a writer's content, indeed, as something which exists before content... [Form] grows from content and is inseparable from it. One doesn't simply pick a form and match ideas to it" (p. 41). The flow of ideas can be inhibited by an early emphasis on the form in which they must be expressed, maintain Collins and Gentner (1980):

One of the most damaging habits for a novice writer to have is that of confusing idea manipulation with text manipulation so that text structure constraints enter into the process of writing at an early stage, before the ideas are ready. When this happens, not only does the writer waste a great deal of time and effort polishing prose that will eventually be discarded but, even worse, the effort to perfect text may cause the writer to lose track of the desired content (p. 53).

These critics object to the position of models in the instructional sequence, maintaining that students need to explore their content knowledge before learning the structure in which they cast it. We see here the seeds of theory about how knowledge affects composing: knowledge of form, both declarative (labeling the parts) and procedural (strategies for producing it), and knowledge of content, both declarative (the writer's factual knowledge base) and procedural (strategies for transforming declarative knowledge into text) (Hillocks, 1986a). These critics contend that procedural knowledge related to content should not be secondary to declarative knowledge of form, as is usually the case when using models to teach writing.

Finally, some critics have raised questions regarding the instructional time and emphasis given to reading models. Gorrell (1977) cautions that reading can become a substitute for writing when teachers focus too intently on the study of literary greats: "The reading-writing course becomes a reading course with a few more or less related theme assignments.... If the reading dominates completely, or is not related to writing, the course ceases to be a composition course" (p. 59). This concern echoes criticisms of other form-related approaches to teaching writing, such as emphasizing grammar: time spent on it takes time away from instruction with other, more effective methods (Hillocks, 1984, 1986b).

In general, experimental research has shown models to have limited value. Models often serve as treatments in control groups along with such well-documented instructional failures as grammar instruction (Hillocks, 1984, 1986b). Even when students study models in experimental groups, their writing rarely improves significantly over the writing of students in control treatments. Models are particularly ineffective when they emphasize a great many features. Vinson (1980), for instance, used models to instruct students in the use of concrete detail, sensory imagery, unnecessary detail, and single impression; the students in this group made no statistically different gains over students in control groups. Only in studies in which models were brief and stressed a few specific features did they improve students' writing to any notable extent (Andreach, 1976; Stefl, 1981). This finding, however, has not been consistently replicated. Even so, the most successful models used in comparative studies have focused on particular features, rather than illustrating the many skills demonstrated by master writers.

Reconciling the Points of View

Much of the criticism of reading models has been as speculative as the justification for using them. My own research on writing processes (Smagorinsky, 1989, 1991) suggests reasons for the uneven effectiveness of models in improving composing. My study was part of a larger piece of research (Hillocks, in progress) contrasting the effects of three instructional treatments on students' skill in writing extended-definition essays. The use of extended definition, one of the traditional writing modes, dates back at least to Aristotle. In learning to write definitions, students acquire a skill that serves them well across a variety of tasks: determining rules or laws, producing criticism, classifying organisms, and distinguishing between items that

belong to a set and those that do not. Definitions have clearly accepted elements common to their use in all disciplines: criteria, or rules that distinguish between members and nonmembers; examples that illustrate the criteria; and contrasting examples that seem to illustrate the criteria but lack some essential characteristic. The following segment, used in all treatments in the Hillocks (in progress) study, illustrates the elements in a definition of ethnic prejudice derived from Gordon Allport's *The Nature of Prejudice*:

Criterion: Ethnic prejudice is thinking ill of others without cause but solely on the basis of presumptions spurred by race, heritage, or ethnicity.

Example: A few years ago many Americans thought exceedingly ill of Turks—but very few had ever seen a Turk, nor did they know any person who had seen one. Their justification lay exclusively in what they had heard of the Armenian massacres and of the legendary Crusades. On such evidence are all members of a nation condemned.

Contrasting example: Take the hostile view of Nazi leaders held by most Americans during World War II. Was it prejudice? The answer is no, because there was abundant available evidence regarding the evil policies and practices accepted as the official code of the party.

Definition is a good form to use for the study of the effects of models since its elements and their relationships can be clearly presented in exemplary essays. Provided that students have content knowledge of the topics, they can use knowledge of form to represent their ideas in essays of this type.

The Research

The three instructional treatments contrasted in the study derived from conflicting theories on the type of knowledge writers need in order to write effectively. One theory states that having students study models of exemplary writing is itself sufficient for them to learn how to write well. The first of the three treatments included extensive study of model definitions with a focus on labeling their elements.

The other two treatments both included a study of model essays, but focused on instruction in a particular type of composing procedure. Instead of assuming that students can extract procedural knowledge from a study of finished products, these treatments assumed that students require explicit instruction in how to write. The types of procedures included in the two

treatments represent different views of the nature of knowledge, a conflict with deep roots in cognitive theory.

The first of these treatments included instruction in general procedures. Students in this treatment group combined a study of model essays with instruction in the general composing procedures of brainstorming and freewriting (which is something like brainstorming on paper—an unrestricted, nonlinear procedure designed to help the writer discover topic, purpose, meaning, and so on). For nearly half a century, educational theorists have attempted to identify general heuristics that learners can apply in any problem-solving situation. Polya (1954), for instance, identified general procedures such as breaking a problem into subproblems, representing problems with diagrams, and so on—all of which can be learned and applied to virtually any problem. Ennis (1990) has argued that “it makes sense to talk about significant general critical thinking abilities and dispositions” (p. 16). Some scholars have argued that certain general composing strategies will enable one to be successful with any composing task. Brainstorming and freewriting are frequently advocated general writing procedures. Theorists such as Elbow (1973) and Murray (1980) have claimed that freewriting is an effective all-purpose writing strategy. Murray describes its merits as follows:

We do not teach our students rules demonstrated by static models; we teach our students to write by allowing them to experience the process of writing. That is a process of discovery, of using written language to find out what we have to say. We believe this process can be adapted by our students to whatever writing tasks face them—the memo, the poem, the textbook, the speech, the consumer complaint, the job application, the story, the essay, the personal letter, the movie script, the accident report, the novel, the scientific paper (p.20).

The remaining treatment was labeled task-specific procedures and combined the study of models with instruction in procedures specific to the task of writing extended definitions. McPeck (1990) has argued that “there are almost as many different kinds of critical thinking as there are different kinds of things to think about” (p. 10) and that therefore general approaches to learning and thinking are inadequate to solve particular types of problems. Rather, different types of tasks require particular knowledge that may not be relevant to other tasks. Writing a complaint about a product, for instance, requires an assessment of how the complaint will be received and the ability

to word the complaint in the most effective way; this approach is not effective if the goal is to write a poem.

The task-specific procedures treatment included instruction in a procedure devised to produce a definition: students were given examples related to the word or phrase to be defined. For instance, students defining “freedom of speech” examined seven examples, along these lines:

- A group of college students, unable to obtain tickets for a rock concert, manage to enter the hall where the concert is about to begin. At a signal, they begin to shout “Fire!” as loudly as they can. Everyone in the hall ignores the shouting.
- Same as above, but a panic ensues and several people are injured.

Students were instructed to generate a criterion from each of the seven examples using these procedures: jot down ideas about the topic, generate examples, consider different versions of each example, generate criteria from the examples, test the criteria with additional examples, revise, and repeat these procedures with different examples.

To study the effects of the treatments, I collected pretest and posttest think-aloud protocols from six students in each group. I asked each student to think aloud as he or she composed, tape-recorded their speaking, and then had the tapes transcribed to be segmented and coded. The protocols allowed me to study changes in the students’ thinking based on the type of knowledge they had gained from instruction. The protocol analysis revealed treatment effects in two main areas: critical thinking and purposeful composing.

Critical thinking. I mean here the ability to generate precise criteria. As noted earlier, definition aims at distinguishing between members and nonmembers of a set. Recall, for instance, the criterion for ethnic prejudice: “Ethnic prejudice is thinking ill of others *without cause*...” Students would often attempt a criterion without sufficient distinction. A student might say simply, “Ethnic prejudice is thinking ill of other types of people,” which is too broad. These “criteria” were categorized in the protocol analyses as *attributes*; that is, statements that describe a characteristic of the concept being defined, but without the contrast necessary to distinguish members from nonmembers.

Another type of generalization was an *incidental statement* which, while often true, is evasive, tangential, or nonessential. Such a statement

might be "Ethnic prejudice has caused a great deal of trouble in the world," which is certainly true but does not help define the concept. Students would often support attributes and incidental statements with examples, but the generation of such statements to the exclusion of criteria showed a lack of precise, critical thinking. Students who improved in the area of critical thinking improved their ratio of criteria to attributes and incidental statements.

Purposeful composing. Here I mean the degree to which students improved their ability to link generalizations to supporting evidence. In their pretests, students tended to produce generalizations (criteria, attributes, and incidental statements) and evidence (examples and contrasting examples) without using them in relation to one another, engaging in a process close to brainstorming.

For instance, in her pretest protocol on "friendship," Cindy generated a series of attributes but did not support any with examples. (In all protocol transcripts that follow, each segment is preceded by its category label, which I inserted. Words recorded in the student's essay are italicized; all statements not in italics were thought without being written.)

Attribute: You don't have to like everything about that person.

Elaborate attribute: That's not what's important.

Attribute: You may not even have anything in common,

Attribute: but *they just make you feel good inside yourself.*

Attribute: They don't care how you look or dress.

Attribute: It's someone to tell your good and bad feelings to.

Attribute: *They try and help you when things are going bad or something's wrong, or try and make situations better or not as bad.*

Elaborate attribute: *They always make you try to see the bright side of things,*

Attribute: *and they don't try to change you to what they want.*

In the posttests, generalizations were less common; students were more likely to focus on providing support for their generalizations. Cindy began her posttest protocol on "leadership" by thinking of ideas before writing, and then using them purposefully as she wrote.

Attribute: Leadership is an action of a person who takes charge.

Attribute: They help people?

Elaborate attribute: They take charge of a group.

Search: What is something like leadership but isn't?

Incidental statement: There's different kinds of leadership.

Attribute: There's social leadership—they organize what's going on.

Attribute: A leader takes charge. Leadership is an action that takes charge over...the person takes charge over people.

Example: They lead in a discussion.

Elaborate example: They start, like in a classroom a teacher starts a class.

Warrant: A teacher is a leader because they take charge of a class and organize and lead it.

Example: The president is a leader.

Positive judgment: That would fit my criteria.

Elaborate example: He can raise taxes or whatever.

Warrant: So he's in charge.

She went on to develop the attribute of "taking charge" into a criterion, supporting this with the example of a teacher assigning students to particular seats to control behavior. Instead of writing down a series of unsupported attributes as she had done in the pretest, she thought about the definition before writing and determined which ideas to relate to each other when she began to write.

Results

Students who combined the study of models with instruction in general or task-specific composing procedures improved more on critical thinking measures than did students who studied only models; similarly, students who combined the study of models with task-specific composing procedures improved more in purposeful composing than did students who studied only models. (Although the students in the general procedures group also improved in purposeful composing, the gains were not as dramatic.)

Critical thinking. According to one-tailed t-tests for individual comparisons among the three treatment groups, students in the task-specific procedures group scored significantly higher than students in the models group

on both the total ($t = 2.588; p < .025$) and written ($t = 2.584; p < .05$) measurements for improving critical thinking. Students in the general procedures group also scored significantly higher than students in the models group on both the total ($t = 2.405; p < .025$) and written ($t = 2.086; p < .05$) measurements. (Contrasts in these improvement scores are shown more fully in Table 1, which gives the specific results on a one-way ANOVA with three levels. Scores labeled "written" are for final drafts of students' essays; scores labeled "total" are for students' taped think-aloud performances.)

Purposeful composing. According to one-tailed t-tests for individual comparisons among treatments, students in the task-specific procedures treatment group scored significantly higher than students in the models treat-

Table 1
ANOVA Improvement Scores on Critical Thinking

Treatment	Mean	Standard Deviation		
Total:				
Models	-.167	5.811		
General procedures	7.667	5.465		
Task-specific procedures	8.0	5.099		
Written:				
Models	0	5.762		
General procedures	5.667	3.327		
Task-specific procedures	7.167	4.0		
	Mean			
Source of Variation	df	Square	F	Significance of F
Total:				
Group	2	128.167	4.29	.034
Error	15	29.878		
Written:				
Group	2	85.722	4.49	.03
Error	15	19.078		

ment for both the total ($t = 2.659; p < .05$) and written ($t = 1.855; p < .05$) measurements. (Contrasts between all three treatment groups, expressed with the results of a one-way ANOVA with three levels, are shown in Table 2.)

Discussion

The results of this study suggest that reliance on reading models alone is insufficient to improve writing. The read-analyze-write sequence described by Eschholz (1980) carries with it an assumption that by studying models students can develop an understanding of appropriate content knowledge, figure out how to structure their content knowledge so that it fits into the form delineated by the model, and render their ideas into coherent prose.

Table 2
ANOVA Improvement Scores on Purposeful Composing

Treatment	Mean	Standard Deviation		
Total:				
Models	2.167	6.853		
General procedures	8.333	10.132		
Task-specific procedures	10.166	2.714		
Written:				
Models	3.5	7.064		
General procedures	5.5	9.628		
Task-specific procedures	9.333	3.077		
	Mean			
Source of Variation	df	Square	F	Significance of F
Total:				
Group	2	105.389	2.014	.168
Error	15	52.333		
Written:				
Group	2	52.722	1.04	.378
Error	15	50.689		

The data from this study suggest that the typical student is not up to the formidable task of teaching him- or herself these composing procedures, a conclusion also reached by Eschholz, who advocated combining models with experience in general composing procedures.

Combining instruction in the forms essays take with instruction in procedural knowledge produced far better results. Both procedural treatments helped students think critically about the ideas generated, and students who were taught task-specific procedures made strong gains in relating definition elements. The addition of instruction in composing procedures clearly boosted the power of the models instruction. Other research suggests that the study of models increases the effectiveness of instruction in general composing procedures. Hillocks's (1984, 1986b) meta-analysis of experimental research on writing from 1963 to 1983 found that freewriting (one of the general composing procedures used in this study) is "only about two-thirds as effective as the average experimental treatment" (1986b, p. 249), while treatments involving an "inquiry" focus (the task-specific procedure in this study) "are nearly four times more effective than freewriting and over two-and-a-half times more powerful than the traditional study of model pieces of writing" (p. 249). Composition research over this 20-year period seems to show that instruction with models greatly enhances the effectiveness of instruction in general composing procedures.

This study supports the notion that writers who understand the relationship between form and content can improve their writing. Simply reading a model piece of writing, however, is insufficient to teach young writers how to produce compositions (see, for example, Greene, in press). A model seems to be most beneficial when learners have appropriate content knowledge and need to learn how to transform it into text; the model can illustrate how to relate the bits of knowledge within a coherent structure. While mindful readers like Ben Franklin might learn procedures for good writing through the diligent study of the masters, most novices need more direct instruction in composing strategies. Teachers and students need to understand how models can effectively complement other types of knowledge.

Important in this understanding is an awareness of the appropriate complexity of the models in terms of the students' content knowledge; the number of features stressed in the model and their relationships to other aspects of instruction; the placement of the model in the instructional sequence; and the allocation of instructional time for the study of models and

for instruction in other aspects of composing. Instruction that combines procedural knowledge related to content with carefully selected models can lead to substantial improvements in writing proficiency.

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