

Rules to Write By: A Consciousness-Raising Activity

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Writing is a quite demanding process, especially for second language learners writing for specific academic audiences whose expectations differ dramatically from those of audiences in other contexts or countries. The following activity has been used successfully to help non-ESL teachers and tutors at UC Berkeley understand and reflect on the issues students face as writers attempting to express ideas while following unfamiliar rules.

Procedure

1. Briefly introduce the exercise, stressing that its purpose is to engage participants in a consciousness-raising activity.
2. Create small groups of 2-3 people.
3. Ask each group to write a short introductory paragraph in response to a prompt. Try to use a prompt that will elicit many different verb tense choices.
4. Have participants follow a set of rules similar to those outlined below. These rules, based loosely on Helen Fox's book on cultural issues in writing issues, ask writers to part significantly from the rules they have most probably learned to write by, this dissonance approximating the experiences L2 student writers face.
5. As groups write, field questions. (Rule #5 will undoubtedly elicit questions.) Note how members interact and negotiate rules.
6. Debrief (see below).

SAMPLE ACTIVITY

Prompt:

As new tutors, you have been examining the role of a tutor and how this role may differ from what classroom teachers do. Write a short (3-4 pages) essay examining the role of the tutor. Be sure to focus on how your perceptions of this role have changed since the beginning of the term.

For today, in your group, focus on what you will write as your introduction. Please follow the rules listed below.

Rules:

1. In introductions, context is all important—be sure to spend a good deal of time establishing the context, setting the mood, and painting a picture for the reader.
2. Creating harmony is key—be sure to gloss over questions or specifics that might raise doubts or that might make you, the writer, seem authoritative.
3. Indirection works well—it is advised never to state your position directly. Instead, juxtapose images for the reader and let the reader make connections on his/her own.
4. Rhetorical questions are privileged, especially when you are moving from one idea to another.
5. Grammar counts, so remember to check verbs. The rule: We do not use verb tenses. Never conjugate the verb. Use simple forms (do, be) but don't forget a time marker (today, now, last term) for each verb.

Debriefing

After the exercise, debriefing is key. Be sure participants have ample time to reflect on the experience, map it onto their students' particular situations, and create concrete plans of action for teaching and tutoring based on their reflections. Some ideas are listed below..

1. Affect—How did you feel as you were writing? How do you feel about the quality of your work? How would you feel being evaluated on this work?
2. Process—How did you approach this task? What was particularly fun? Frustrating? How did you alter your normal process? How did you negotiate all five rules--simultaneously? Separately? What worked? What didn't? What questions arose?
3. Action—How might this experience explain some issues student writers face? How might this exercise have helped you empathize? How can we relate this experience of following unfamiliar rules to different contexts, not just different countries but also different educational backgrounds, majors, etc.?

Reference

Fox, H. (1994). *Listening to the World : Cultural Issues in Academic Writing*. Urbana, IL: NCTE