

The Writers Room™ Program: TRAINING

A TASTE OF TRAINING

After the coaches in training have completed their own Memory of Writing exercise, we ask them to read the first draft of a short essay written in response to the word loss.

We tell them: “The First Rule of Coaching is to read without a pen or pencil in your hands. Read the draft the way you read a book or a newspaper article. Sit on your hands if you have to.”

We then say: “Look for a strength—it could be an idea, a single word, or the rhythm of a particular sentence. Tell the writer what you found and why you think it is good. The Second Rule of Coaching is to find something that works in a piece of writing. This rule is always based on reality—it’s not a matter of empty praise. Instead, it is the force that drives revision.

LOSS DRAFT

. . . A loss is a very hurtful ordeal. I lost my mother and my grandmother. They were both my guiding light from birth. Why did they have to leave me in the youth of my life? . . . I also lost my entire family, but not from death, but because we are not close anymore. My brother is close to me, because he’s a sweet, teasing brother and he loves me like I love him. . .

“What strength do you find in this excerpt from the Loss draft?”

“Circle the words and phrases you like. Think about why you like them. Some of you will read mostly for meaning and be amazed at how much is in this particular word or that particular sentence. Others may be captured by an image and ponder it. Still others will respond to the rhythm of the phrases.”

We give them time to read, respond, circle, or underline, and, especially, to think.

Then we go around the table, asking each person in turn to tell one thing they liked about the essay. What would you say?

The responses have been consistent over the years. Here are the favorites.

A loss is a very hurtful ordeal.

Readers say that the word *ordeal* catches their attention right away because it is unusual.

Why did they have to leave me in the youth of my life?

Readers love the rhythm of the line. They usually say it out loud.

They also love the phrase “the youth of my life.” To many, it sounds Biblical.

I also lost my entire family, but not from death, but because we are not close anymore.

Readers are usually stunned by this sentence. Now the writer has presented them with another kind of loss. They must read on.

... he’s a sweet, teasing brother and he loves me like I love him ...

Once more the rhythm of the writing moves the readers – and the phrase “*sweet, teasing brother*” adds another powerful image.

BUT, BUT, BUT, BUT

Yes, the first few times readers respond, they almost always try to add a “but.”

They say, “The first sentence is great, BUT the third sentence is a cliché.”

They say, “I really like the sentence about the rest of the family. BUT the writer really needs to go into more detail.”

As each speaker says BUT, we say, “Right now, we’re just finding the things we like, the things we want the writer to keep in the essay.” We know that there will be BUTS because it is a very new and difficult discipline to ask the coach in training to ignore correcting and to focus **ONLY ON WHAT WORKS**.

SECOND TASTES

We can only give you a single Taste of Training here, because each training session consists of the presentation of concepts followed by reading and responding to actual student papers—elementary, middle school, or high school, depending on the training. The Memory of Writing that begins the training gives coaches an opportunity to learn something about the way they think about their own writing, and also establishes the interactive process of sharing our thoughts about what we are reading and what we are learning.

By the end of the initial six weeks of training, most of the trainees are able to identify something that works in a piece of writing—something that the student can build on. We do not expect everyone to identify the same things—only that each person learn to identify an idea that can be developed.

Coaches also learn how to make suggestions for revision that stay true to what works in the first draft. When a coach works with a student on a persuasive essay or position paper, s/he is most concerned that the student can support each point in a convincing manner, and that the introduction lets the reader know what the topic is and indicates the general thrust of the student position. The comments that are made in discussion are then written on a response sheet to serve as a guideline for the student revision. The same

approach is used no matter what the genre--a short story, a biography, a research paper, a song, a persuasive essay.

Also, each response sheet has space on the bottom for some general comments about mechanics or word usage.

How much can coaches learn in six weeks? A lot. They have learned to see what's on the page and to help a student envision what else could be there.

Once they start working in the classrooms they are supervised by the coach manager, until they are ready to solo. However, they always have a go-to person, and coaches often help each other. Because this kind of work is new, we are all always learning. That's what makes it satisfying, and that's what keeps it growing.

The training system is the same for community members, for high school students, and for student teachers at Montclair State University. Staff development is also constructed around the same principles, using the same kinds of student papers. Our program would not be successful otherwise. The teachers of the Montclair School System have always welcomed us as partners—we are and always will be in this together.

If you have further questions about the program or the training, please email me at Sheila@writersroomprogram.org.

Thanks,

Sheila Crowell