Writing at Regents School of Austin

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One of the main challenges faced by teachers in classical Christian schools is the challenge faced by teachers everywhere: how to teach students not only to think clearly and critically, but also to express those thoughts and ideas in writing that is itself clear, organized, well developed, and elegant. At Regents School of Austin, the senior thesis presentation—our culminating project for seniors—draws upon all of the skills in speaking and rhetoric that we have tried to cultivate in our students from the time they are small. At its heart, however, the senior thesis is also the largest and most complex writing project these students have ever tackled. As their teachers, we must make sure that we are equipping them with the skills they need to conceive of, plan, and finally execute what is for them a massive undertaking.

With this end in mind, over the past five years the School of Rhetoric humanities faculty at Regents has undertaken a systematic revision of our writing curriculum and classroom practices. This has been a daunting task. Not only must we sort out, examine, and finally revise our curriculum, but we must always be mindful of how that curriculum translates into everyday practice for teachers and students. A beautifully constructed writing curriculum is useless if it does not help each student become a better writer.

But what makes a student a better writer? Conventional wisdom says that the more students write, the more practice they will get and the better they will become. To a certain extent, there is a bit of truth in this assumption. Even five years ago, our writing curriculum was notable for the amount of writing our students had to do. At Regents, "theme" is the designation for a writing assignment, usually longer than a five-paragraph essay, that requires time outside of class. The number of themes a student writes increases as they advance through high school. Ninth graders write one literature theme and one history theme per semester; tenth and eleventh graders write two literature themes and one history theme per semester. Seniors write two literature themes and one history theme in the fall semester, and one of each in the spring semester. In addition to humanities themes, students also write a theme in one of our math classes, as well as the usual lab reports in their science classes. In short, Regents high school students do a lot of writing.

Simply assigning a paper and then collecting and grading it several weeks later, however, does not teach a student how to approach a writing project. While crafting a purposeful, focused assignment is important to ensuring student success, writing instruction requires a more hands-on approach. We have kept all of the core assignments, the themes and in many cases the in-class essays, but over the last several years we have radically changed how we guide students through those assignments.

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Perhaps the most visible feature of our writing program is the amount of time we spend on writing instruction in class. Rather than assuming that students arrive in the high school with "the basics," ready to approach ever more complex assignments, we instead assume that each writing experience is a fresh and new one for students. This means that for research papers, we spend class time with freshman and sophomores helping them navigate the print and electronic resources at their disposal. We work through with them how one gathers resources, evaluates their usefulness and credibility, puts them in the service of supporting an argument, and cites them responsibly. We do not do this because we think that teachers in the lower grades have failed to instruct the students in these "basics," but rather, because we realize that in the context of a new and more difficult assignment, even the "basics" can seem daunting for a student writer. Since students must face increasingly complex

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assignments, they need help applying the skills they have acquired in lower grades to a world of research that is ever expanding.

For non-research assignments—and in addition to researching for other assignments—we walk students through a drafting process. As a class, we analyze model thesis statements and craft our own, then workshop student examples on the board. The emphasis is always on revision, even in the early stages. Each writing assignment requires a rough draft, which students bring to class and peer review. We have borrowed the concept and practice of peer review from the model of university writing centers, whose student-centered and process-oriented approach to writing marries nicely with the classical Christian emphasis on student-directed learning. Reading and constructively critiquing a peer's paper helps a student writer to see the strengths and weaknesses in his or her own paper.

In most humanities classes, only the final paper of an assignment receives a grade. Our main aim in this practice is to train students that writing is a process, one that takes time and effort, and that sustained effort produces results that are not always immediately tangible. Because each instructor teaches multiple grades, we often have the benefit of watching student writers grow over the years, and we urge them to view their own development long term. To borrow a phrase from contemporary composition theory, we aim to produce better writers, not better papers.

It is difficult to say whether the changes to the Regents writing curriculum originated from theory or practice. It is clear that they came about as a result of a team effort between teachers from kindergarten through high school. After completing an intensive documentation project, gathering and reporting on all goals, purposes, and lesson plans, the team leaders of the lower grades met as a committee with the teachers of the School of Rhetoric to discuss our curriculum. We adopted a new base-level curriculum, the Jane Schaffer Writing Program, which is used primarily in the lower grades but is also referenced at the high school level. Using a uniform curriculum gives us a vocabulary for writing that stretches across the grade levels and makes communication with students and among faculty easier, but the curriculum is merely the starting point. We still assume that the teacher has a great deal of flexibility and autonomy in the classroom, and that good writing instruction requires an active and sustained effort on the part of the teacher.

As our school grows, the challenge becomes adapting the classroom practices we have developed to larger class sizes and a more diverse faculty. The growth in class size has required that we hire more new faculty members, not all of whom have been trained in the Jane Schaffer method. Larger class sizes also make it more difficult for teachers to give students the kind of individual attention that promotes student ownership of their own writing and accountability for their work. Such new challenges, however, have the positive effect of requiring that we constantly question our practices and reshape them according to the needs of the class.

Each new teacher brings unique experiences and knowledge to our faculty community and the use of a common school language allows us to integrate new people and ideas while at the same time keeping a constant that everyone can build upon. Then, we teachers work with the students to craft their own individual voice to the issue at hand while using a common vocabulary across the grade spectrum and curriculum. Each student brings a different writing issue and needs to be approached as a unique person in order to get the best from them. This also encourages them to see their own potential and other ways various writing problems can be addressed as they see us model these with them. While the writing is uniquely theirs, their teachers have helped them begin to grasp the effort necessary to craft sentences and paragraphs into a cohesive whole that expresses exactly what they want to say and nothing more. This is a long and arduous task at times, but the result, students who are capable of writing well and understanding how they arrived at a well-written paper, are a harvest well worth the effort.