

## A Writing Road Trip

by Ty Fischer, Veritas Academy

A few years ago, I had the distinct privilege of flying out to Louisville, Kentucky, and sitting in on a few writing classes at the Highlands Latin School there. I was going to see the teacher of these classes, the agrarian poet/

of that day back to my school and to the curriculum-writing work that I do—particularly in the area of writing. We are in the process of revising our scope and sequence for writing. We have been blessed to produce some good writers,

of classical Christian education will stand or fail based on the writers that we produce.<sup>3</sup> Here are some of the good principles that I have discovered through reflection on the work that we have done (both our successes and failures) and upon reflection from watching others, like Berry, teach and talk about writing:

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*We could say that the entire success of the movement of classical Christian education will stand or fail based on the writers that we produce.*

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**1. Pride is the great enemy of good writing and the enemy of making progress toward becoming a good writer.** In his poem *Damage*, Wendell Berry says, “Good work finds the way between pride and despair.” Becoming a good writer is immensely hard work. We should (at the first possible opportunity) help our students murder the myth that good writing is some sort of magical ability that descends on some and not others.<sup>4</sup> Good writing comes through practice—painful practice. Pride often keeps people from becoming better writers. Teachers should note that two of the first steps that they will need to take if they want to encourage better writing have to do with environment and toughness. Teachers must create a classroom environment in which risk taking in writing is encouraged, in which vulnerability is protected (because reading your own writing to others is the epitome of being vulnerable). Also, teachers must help their student gain the maturity and strength that will enable them to hear the truth from others about their writing. There is nothing harder for the young writer to hear than comments from others like “that

farmer/philosopher and essayist Wendell Berry. A few years ago, I stumbled unto Berry’s writing, listening to an old cassette tape version of Ken Myers reading Berry’s “The Work of Local Culture.”<sup>1</sup> The essay stuck me like a thunderclap. I listened to the tape so many times that I burned it up. I bought another and the same thing happened. My wife hid the third tape from me, so I bought Berry’s *What are People For?* Berry is one of my favorite authors and getting to sit in on a few of his writing classes was a blessing. It got even better. After his first class, he had a two-hour break. I was traveling with my board chairman Bruce Gingrich.<sup>2</sup> We implored him to have lunch with us. The conversation ranged from the Scriptures, to politics, to the reading habits of the plain sects in Lancaster County, to ethanol (not a favorite of his), to classical education and writing. He was gracious and lively. Often I remember that day and smile.

I have tried to bring some parts

but we want to do even better. Revising writing standards has been more difficult than many other areas of our curriculum. We are all deeply interested in producing excellent writers. We all know that a school that teaches rhetoric should have students who are able to communicate effectively and winsomely. We have found, however, that making writing practice consistent has been challenging. As we work through these issues as a school, we need the patience to both attempt and fail, to retool and move forward. We have a lot to learn. We also need to share (amongst our schools) our insights and struggles in search of sound principles upon which good curriculum (in the broadest sense) can be employed and classical methodology can be faithfully implemented in order to produce excellent writers whose work glorifies Christ and calls people to deep reflection, repentance, faith, and faithfulness. We could say that the entire success of the movement

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part did not make sense,” or “what are you saying anyway?” Pride places us above the opinion (and help) of others. Humility shows us the world and our work for what it really is. Improving as a writer begins with the renouncing of pride. Often it is our best students who struggle most at this point. They are used to getting high grades and pats on the back. This will not happen immediately when they draft papers. If they cannot or will not hear the criticism of others they will never have the opportunity to improve.

**2. Writing excellently can best be done in community.** If we need others to help us see our writing for what it is, then writing is best done in community. As believers, we all benefit from these sorts of writing communities. The Inklings were just this sort of group. They criticized each others’ work vigorously. Tolkien reportedly thought that *The Chronicles of Narnia* were silly. He criticized them vigorously. From that tiny group we have *The Space Trilogy*, *The Lord of the Rings*, and many other works. Community and criticism helps us become better writers. Berry’s wife, Tanya, serves as his chief editor—typing, correcting, and critiquing his work.

**3. Good writing is what remains after editing scours away the dross (painfully).** When our community (and especially our teachers) gathers to help us with our writing, they will need to edit our work. This, especially initially, will be quite painful. In Berry’s class, he would read each of the student’s

writing out loud to the rest of the class and then make comments. Some comments were lauding good work—most were not. They were suggestions on how a piece could be improved or criticism concerning how a particular piece was not best. As an editor myself and as a writer who submits work to others, I know how this hurts. Help your students understand that this pain is necessary. (One practical way to do this is by saving an initial draft and having them read the draft and the final product after editing and see how the pain has improved the work.)

**4. Short assignments that are highly edited provide more practice at producing good writing.** Too often, we give writing assignments that are far too long—at least initially. I noticed that the work that the students, juniors and seniors, turned in to Berry were very brief. Most were handwritten on one side of a sheet of paper. I believe that they were not allowed to exceed one page. These short assignments allow for more and heavier editing to be done by the teacher. Too often, we make assignments that we only have time to grade once. This, more often than not, means that very little learning is done. Too often no correcting is possible. I have begun to give my students shorter assignments that are heavily edited. They can turn the assignment in three times. I grade it and mark it up. Often the initial grades are uniformly very (very) low, but the advice that I give should enable them to improve their work substantially.<sup>5</sup> Also, shorter assignments help the teacher have

more time to grade and edit. The editing done on longer papers too often outstrips a teacher’s time constraints. This leads to sloppy editing and less improvement.

**5. “Write about what you know . . . and you don’t know much.”** This quote, uttered by Berry (which was uttered with a loving grin) during his writing class points back to humility and the first of Gregory’s laws.<sup>6</sup> Gregory tells us that we need to know that which we teach. Berry echoes people like Jane Austen who command and, by their writing, inspire us to both live deeply and then write about what we know. Too often students disobey this sensible sanction to the ruin of their writing. After giving the students a few brief readings in the Scriptures and the Great Books on the topic of freedom, Berry had the students write about freedom. After reading through their work, he encouraged them to be less abstract and more concrete. He said something like this: “Write about the freedom you experience when your father gives you the car keys. You probably know a lot about that.” The closer we push students to write about their own experiences in believable ways, the better their writing can become.

These are just a few principles that can help us encourage better writing amongst our students. A few, I say, because there are many more. Writing and encouraging good writing is more an expedition and journey than checklist. As we venture down the path, we venture in hope, knowing that we serve a God who communicates to us in words and who sent us His Son—calling Him the Word.

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### NOTES

1. This audio anthology entitled “Place, Community, and Memory” is available (now in MP3 format so that you will not burn through 3 or 4 tapes) from Mars Hill Audio and can be found at <http://www.marshillaudio.org/catalog/antholog.asp>.

2 This was another blessing. How many school administrators have board chairman who would make a trip like this with them?

3. In fact, we have said something like this. See Douglas Wilson’s essay “The Why and How of Literature” in *Repairing the Ruins*, ed. Douglas Wilson (Moscow, ID: Canon Press, 1996) which says, on page 169, “Christian schools which cannot produce great writers are failures as schools.”

4. This is not a denial of the fact that great writing (not just good writing) does come, I believe, from and through a person’s unique personality. Some perspectives and persons are more interesting than others. The Spirit does bestow gifts. Even for those of gifting, however, pride can restrain, retard, or diminish the usefulness of the gift.

5. As the managing editor of the Veritas Press Omnibus Project, I have worked this same pattern into many of the writing assignments in *Omnibus IV, V, and VI*. The instructions for writing assignments are as follows: Remember, quality counts more than quantity. You should write no more than 1,000 words, either typing or writing legibly on one side of a sheet of paper. You will lose points for writing more than this. You will be allowed to turn in your writing three times. The first and second times

you turn it in, your teacher will grade it by editing your work. This is done by marking problem areas and making suggestions for improvement. You should take these suggestions into consideration as you revise your assignment. Only the grade on your final submission will be recorded.

6. This refers to John Milton Gregory’s *The Seven Laws of Teaching*.