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## Questions About Writing and the Writing Process

Teaching writing begins with you, the tutor/instructor. You may find that the exercises in *Writing Out Loud* will challenge you as well as your student. You may find that your own comfort level with writing isn't where you would like it to be. That's okay! One of the benefits of a handbook like this, is that it encourages a team approach to learning. You are probably full of questions. Let me see if I can answer some of them for you.

### **My student says he doesn't like to write. What can I do to help him feel more comfortable with writing?**

The first thing we need to do is establish a sense of "safety". When we feel safe, we are much more willing to try new ideas and have fun with our learning. By "safe", I mean feeling comfortable, at ease, accepted, relaxed, unthreatened. We create safe learning environments by making sure we (the student and teacher) are comfortable with one another, that the learning setting (the kitchen table, the library or the classroom) is warm and welcoming, and that there is a feeling of respect and good will between the student and teacher. Trust is important too, but I have found that working together on exercises such as the ones in this handbook can be what builds trust and an even greater sense of safety. When a student feels safe, a willingness to try will follow.

To help the students feel safe in the Chapters classroom, we created a set of guidelines called "The Chapters Commitment". The students took great care in writing and thinking about these guidelines. They revised them and added to them as they felt it necessary. This simple "code of ethics" was a terrific reference for all of us. As each new student joined the program, she was given these guidelines as a starting point. The students had many questions about what is expected of them. I found they really appreciated knowing from the beginning that their feelings and needs (like the "right to pass") would be taken into consideration.

*[unedited] At first I was a little worried about writing my thoughts and feelings out on paper but by the end of the lesson I realized that there was no pressure on me to share my work with the rest of the class so I am a lot more comfortable now.*

*Viv  
Basic Job Readiness Training, Medicine Hat*

# The Chapters Commitment

While I am a participant in the Chapters Program I will do my best to:

- respect the uniqueness and ability of each person in the Program.
- not pass judgement on others and will be fair and helpful with my comments.
- help to create an accepting place to learn.
- be allowed to "pass" on activities that I do not want to take part in.
- respect the people in the program by not using their names or speaking about them or their writing in discussion about the program outside of the classroom.
- give everybody equal opportunity to speak and to take part in the Chapters Program.
- be a good listener.
- give everyone the right to have their own opinion as I have a right to mine.
- understand that it is okay for me to express my own needs (ie. quiet time, time out, etc.).
- contact the coordinator or a classmate if I am unable to attend class as I understand that my being at Chapters is important to my own success and to the success of the Chapters Program.
- play an active part as a member of the team of creative people who are working together to build and shape the Chapters Program.

Signed: \_\_\_\_\_

Dated: \_\_\_\_\_



### **Does my student have to be a good writer to do these exercises?**

The average grade level of the students in the Chapters Program was Grade 7. BUT that doesn't mean these exercises won't work for students who are not writing at as high a level.

These exercises have been field-tested with beginning ESL students, adult basic education students, students in volunteer literacy programs, elementary school students, instructors and program administrators. Some tutors have found success in acting as scribes to help their students tell their stories. And some instructors have simply adapted the exercises to fit the needs and abilities of the students in their classrooms.

With all the students I have worked with, it wasn't their grade level that held them back from writing; it was their confidence. They were "reluctant writers" because they were afraid they would be criticized. Many were embarrassed about their handwriting. Many thought they had nothing to say. Once the students tried "writing from the heart" and had a chance to feel good about putting words on paper, their reluctance was replaced with excitement. No matter what their skill level, they started to look forward to writing opportunities.

*My worst subject in high school was English because of the essay writing we had to do. I remember counting the words to see if I had enough for a 500 word essay. My letter writing over the years was only what was absolutely necessary. Listening to Deborah talk about writing from within was very interesting and I found writing we did today much easier than I have ever experienced before.*

*Gladys  
Basic Job Readiness Training, Medicine Hat*

### **What do you mean by "writing from the heart"?**

When we talk about writing, most people think about essays, reports and business letters. That's only one kind of writing. The writing I'm talking about in this handbook is what we call "writing from the heart" – writing about how we feel, in words that are as simple as the words we think and speak.

Many people think they can't write because they can't write "well". They think their writing has to be "correct" and assume that if they are not good at spelling or grammar, then they are not good at writing. It took the students a few weeks to believe me when I told them I didn't care about spelling or grammar or what the words looked like on the page. I just wanted them to write – to write for the pure pleasure of it. I explained to them that if we worry about where to put the

comma before we start writing, we'll never write anything. Once the students stopped worrying, they started writing. They wrote about things that were important to them, they wrote in their own words and they were amazed by what they had to say. This is writing from the heart.

### **How do I grade this kind of writing?**

Some of you are working in classroom settings with curriculums and specific goals that have to be met. It is important to give students grades or marks for their work. I am not convinced, however, that writing from the heart is something that should be graded. Evaluated perhaps, but not graded.

Instructors have asked me if writing with little concern for spelling and grammar is encouraging "good writing". The initial writing we do is without regard for spelling or grammar, but it's always possible to go back and "polish" what we've written. I have had students so pleased with a certain piece, that they WANT to go back and correct their spelling or improve the structure of the sentences. They will actually ask me correct their work, red pen and all. This is when the grammar lessons are most effective – well after the student believes that he does in fact have the ability to write.

In the Chapters Program, we have an expression we call the "GBT's" or the "Goose Bump Theory". If you read or hear someone's writing and it gives you goose bumps, then it is good writing. Writing from the heart is what gives us the GBT's. The words mean something; they reach deep down inside you and make you think and feel and smile. This kind of writing is where we all need to start. I always encourage the students to polish the pieces of writing that gave us the GBT's because those are the pieces of writing that have the most meaning for them, that they are most proud of.

Writing from the heart takes a lot of courage and a sense of adventure – strengths that are perhaps more valuable in the long run than the knowledge of good grammar. Students should be credited for that courage and willingness to try.

Writing essays and reports is important, but no more important than writing from the heart. Help your students find things to write about that have meaning to them. Let them write in their own words. Encourage them to write and keep writing. The students' writing will improve just from the sheer volume of the words and sentences they put on paper.

*Perhaps one of the most exciting aspects of the Chapters process is the foundation of being student centred... All of the aspects of the process revolve around students. The topics, learning, resources and activities involve students thoroughly.*

*It is the "interests" of the students which are addressed. It is the resources of the students which are utilized. It is access to additional resources "by" the*

*students which form the learning environment. And it is the accomplishments of the students which are identified and celebrated. For some practitioners a shift in traditional thinking must occur. Focusing on curriculum or a series of exercises must be adapted. Instead of setting the framework for learning it is the students' writing which sets the framework in which curriculum "resources" may be most appropriately used. Initial reactions by some practitioners are that this will take more time and fewer "tasks" (curriculum task) must be completed. The realization that students are gaining "specific" skills, of interest to them, means that these skills will directly impact their daily lives. The transference from classroom learning to life is now part of the process.*

*Allen Vandenberg  
Chapters Administrator, Medicine Hat College*

### **How do I encourage reading at the same time that my students are concentrating on writing?**

All of the instructions for the writing exercises in *Writing Out Loud* will suggest that everyone read their writing out loud to one another. This may not be comfortable for your student(s), at least not in the beginning. If you read your writing out loud, your students will be encouraged to follow suit. The words that they write make wonderful reading material. The words are familiar (at least by sound) and the content of the writing is of interest and meaning to them. Without realizing it, the students in the Chapters Program were improving both their reading and writing skills, just by writing down their stories and reading them out loud.

I also found that students sometimes wrote about things that reminded me of a book I had read. I would then recommend the book, which they were usually able to find at the local library. When one of the students wrote about her "hot flashes", we found all kinds of written material (books and pamphlets) on menopause to read together. The students also brought in magazine articles they found relating to subjects we had talked about.

I read stories out loud to the students, just so they could hear different authors say things in different ways. They loved being read to and would bring in stories of their own to have me read.

The focus of this handbook is writing, but writing in conjunction with reading certainly makes the writing experience that much richer.



**What do I do if my student writes about difficult things that I really don't want to hear about?**

All literacy workers have felt "in over their heads" at different times. It is an unavoidable reality that many of our students have very difficult lives and need more support than we as instructors are able to give them. The students entering our programs today have higher needs than ever before.

*In Alberta there is little debate amongst adult educators that the student population entering the learning environment has changed greatly in the past 5 years. Students are coming in with not only literacy challenges, but also with a whole range of personal issues.*

*The backgrounds are diverse and often devastating. The challenge for the literacy practitioner has become trying to enhance literacy skills while recognizing the personal management issues. It is very difficult for a student to learn while in the midst of crisis.*

*Glenda Staples  
Life Skills Coach Trainer, Medicine Hat College  
Chapter 2 Final Report*

There have certainly been times that students in the Chapters Program read personal stories that were heart-wrenching, that had us all in tears. What always followed, however, was tremendous support from the other students and a lightness of heart for the student who had read her writing out loud.

I have also found that writing from the heart helps students do some of their own healing work. It helps them identify where there are blocks to moving forward in their lives, what choices they made in the past that perhaps weren't healthy, and more importantly, where their strengths are. In a safe learning environment, they can explore their own feelings and ideas at their own pace.

When we write, we rarely take our writing to a depth that we personally can't handle. If a student is writing about something that happened to her when she was a child, she will write only about what she is able to think about safely. I have seen people in verbal therapy sessions blurt out things that they were obviously not ready to deal with. I have never seen that happen with writing. There is something in the timing of the thought process of getting words on paper that allows for more careful and controlled thought.

Having said that, I also want to assure you that you are not expected to be a counsellor or a therapist. There are support services available in your community that you can refer your students to for extra support or counselling. I have referred students from Chapters to Alberta Mental Health, the Woman's Shelter, the Career Centre, AADAC (Alberta Alcohol and Drug Abuse Commission), AA, and Al-Anon. I work closely with a social worker at Alberta

Social Services to make sure that I know the (ever-changing) rules and guidelines of the Social Assistance system and I make sure that all the students know the local Crisis Hotline number.

I used to panic when my students wrote about difficult things. I'd think, "What should I do? What should I say?" One day, when one of the students wrote about the horrible abuse she had suffered as a child, I blurted out in tears, "I wish I knew what to do to help you". Shelly smiled at me and said: "It's OK Deborah. I didn't expect you to do anything. I just needed someone to listen."

We all need to have our lives and our stories validated. We need to be validated as people. Don't be afraid of writing from the heart because your student might write about difficult things. Getting feelings out is a good thing. Talk to each other, listen to your student, help your student find the resources he needs to help him deal with the issues that might be getting in the way of his learning.

**What you're talking about sounds a lot like life skills. Is there a connection between literacy and life skills?**

Absolutely! Learning doesn't happen in isolation from real life. I have found that when we openly recognize that real life is actually *part* of learning, the students' learning is much more effective.

*Chapters helps students to look at their lives, make decisions about that and to set goals. This is largely accomplished through writing. By implementing Chapters "real-life literacy", students are able to develop literacy and life skills simultaneously thus avoiding having to decide which is more important – literacy or life skills.*

*Chapters is able to meet the diverse needs of the students and they enjoy it. This means they attend classes not through threats or pressure, but because they really want to be there. They not only learn to learn, but learn to like learning.*

*Glenda Staples, Life Skills Coach Trainer  
Chapter 2 Final Report*

Writing has always been seen as an academic activity. The team of people who worked on this project know now that writing can also be used as a means of self discovery and personal growth. That's the life skills and literacy connection that we are convinced is of great importance to literacy programming today. When we are learning we are growing. When we don't feel capable of learning and don't see learning as a good thing, we are also denying ourselves important opportunities for personal development.



A definition of literacy/life skills currently being used at Medicine Hat College is: *gaining confidence to know I can learn, knowing I am worthy and knowing I have some thing(s) valuable to contribute.*

It can be argued that if teaching literacy skills includes helping students “learn to learn”, then teaching literacy skills also means facilitating personal development. We believe that literacy is a life skill!

*I think everyday now is a learning experience to me whether it be good or bad. It's still learning. Learning makes me realize things. I surprise myself lately because I want to learn so much and I'm not afraid anymore to make a mistake. I know I won't crumble if I do. Only one year ago, I remember learning how to fill out withdrawal and deposit slips at the bank. I felt very scared and would be sweating in line thinking I did it wrong. I almost started crying whenever I had to fill out a form of some kind. Now I just do the best I can and I know if I make a mistake it can be fixed. I am really ready to learn now. I think I have let go of the idea that I am stupid and won't learn, so now that I don't have that block in my brain, I have room in there to take in new information and understand it. Now I like learning and will continue to learn for the rest of my life.*

*Carol,*  
*excerpted from Rediscover Learning, Rediscover Life*

**Okay, you've convinced me to try more writing with my student. How do I get started?**

Keep reading. Spend a little time familiarizing yourself with the exercises in this handbook. Imagine trying some of the ideas with your student. The next time you get together with your student, tell him you want to try something a little different. Then just go for it; as you both learn and grow, you'll find your literacy work more enjoyable than ever.

## Polish & Publish

Nothing gives writers more confidence than to have their words published. Unfortunately, most people think that published work has to be “saleable”, ie. printed and sold. A definition from the Webster’s Dictionary for the word “publish” that I particularly like is, “to put into circulation”. There are many ways to have students’ writings put into circulation. But first we have to talk about “polishing”.

In the Chapters Program we wrote and wrote and wrote, without worrying about punctuation or spelling or grammar. We wrote to get our thoughts on paper. But when the time came to show our work to the outside world, we took our pieces of writing and thoughtfully began the process of polishing our work.

*“First you find the gold, then you go back and polish it.”*

*Joel Saltzman,  
If You Can Talk You Can Write*

To polish means to rethink, revise and rewrite each line and each paragraph of writing. Well-known writers say that they rewrite everything they write at least five times before it is published.

*“I have never thought of as myself as a good writer. Anyone who wants reassurance of that should read one of my first drafts. But I’m one of the best rewriters.”*

*James A. Michener*

When we are doing day-to-day writing exercises, I suggest that the students put a star on the top of the pages of writing they like or are pleased with. (When someone reads a piece of writing out loud that gives the others the GBTs, right away someone says, “Better put a star on that one!”) That way the students have a number of pieces to work with when we decide to do some polishing.

The students really look forward to polishing their writing, especially the pieces they are proud of. They have learned that “the red pen” provides them with ideas to improve their work. Before, they had only seen “corrections” as criticism, not suggestions for improvement. The first time we go through the process of editing their work in preparation for publication, the students are quite uncomfortable and unsure of themselves. Once they see their stories in print, however, they are ecstatic. They soon learn to trust the process.

We have “put into circulation” or published our work in the local newspaper, literacy journals and newsletters, research reports, brochures, posters and self-published booklets. Some of the students have had their work published in church bulletins, national magazines and anthologies. Even though they haven’t been paid for their work, the students enjoy calling themselves “published writers”. And so they should. The process of preparing work for publication is an act of determination, discipline and faith.

### Exercise Steps

1. Ask your student(s) to go back through their binders or notebooks and find a piece of writing that appeals to them.
2. Have them read their work and see how they feel about it now. Aside from spelling and punctuation, what improvements would they like to make?
3. If you are in a classroom, have the student(s) read their piece out loud for feedback from the other students. If you are working one-to-one, you can still answer these questions with your student.

“What did you like about this piece of writing?”

“Is there information missing?”

“Does the writer get her point across?”

“Do you have any ideas on how the writing could be improved?”

4. Now, as the instructor, read the student’s story and offer your suggestions, including spelling, sentence structure, punctuation.
5. As an assignment, ask the student(s) to polish a piece of writing well enough to read it out loud. (Some of the students who were particularly shy or uncomfortable with their reading ability asked me to read their stories for them.)

## Writing Examples

Unedited

heros come in difrent shapes an sises. Som are tall or samll, some ar hppe or glad. But the 1 hero I see coms out from within you and me. IT is that part of us that shos the werld that we care. If you are down it will frown for awhile then your hero will say I am stil here don't be so hard on yerself.

She is my frend and my pal and my budy. That person who knos me beter than i kno myself. she is the valus of who you are. Som call her ther consiense, som call her ther hart. But to me she is the valus that my mom tot to me she is who Shelly really is.

Hero

Heroes come in different shapes and sizes. Some are tall or small, some are happy or glad. But one hero I see comes out from within you and me. It is that part of us that shows the world that we care. If you are down, she will frown for awhile, then your hero will say, "I am here. Don't be so hard on yourself".

She is my friend, my pal and my buddy. She is the person who knows me better than I know myself. She is the values of who I am. Some call her their conscience, some call her their heart. But to me, she is the values that my mom taught to me. She is who Shelly really is.

Shelly  
Chapters, Camrose

## Adaptations

The definition of publishing being "put into circulation" works well with the idea of reading work out loud. To get used to the idea of having an audience (ie. the fact that others would be hearing or reading our words) we had a formal "reading" in the classroom. Everyone had at least one piece to read. The students each stood up in front of the class and read the polished version of their thoughts and stories. They told each other why they chose this piece and how they felt about reading it.

There is certainly a physical and emotional transition for students to be able (like all writers) to let go of their words, to put them into circulation. Take time to talk about this “letting go”. It is one thing to take the risk to put your words on paper, but another to have others read or hear the words. The students had a lot of questions and concerns at first:

“What if my family doesn’t like what I said?”

“What if people think what I wrote sounds too much like Grade 5 writing?”

“How do I know people won’t laugh at me?”

We had to take a lot of time to work through our feelings about being “in the limelight”. Some of the students decided to use a pen name, some credited their pieces with only their first names. They were given the freedom to deal with their concerns in the way that worked best for them. Most of the students were very private people, some literally for reasons of personal safety. Even with their doubts, the students were proud of what they had written. Needless to say, our first publication was an overwhelming success and not one student received a negative comment about their work.

## Reflections

Polishing writing is simply part of the writing process. Once the students understood that, they were eager to polish more of their work. With all the freewriting and writing exercises we did, it wasn’t long before they had pages and pages of writing in their binders – obvious proof that they could write.

Putting together a publication can be long and tedious work, and as with most publishing projects, we ended up working to deadlines. All the teamwork skills and strengths the group had developed over the weeks of writing together sure came through while we were in production.

To celebrate our work and our writing, we held a “book launch” for our first booklet publication. We invited friends and family, local dignitaries and the press. We had snacks and coffee and even an autographing table (all designed and prepared by the students). One of my friends who works at the TD Bank took her new copy of *The Hearts of Women* back to the bank with her, then half an hour later called to ask for 20 more copies; all the women there wanted their own copy! These were professional working women who had been moved by what the students had written. That phone call was a true moment of success for the students. All the hours of rewriting and rethinking and rewriting again, had paid off. They were no longer afraid of their audience.