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Expanding Horizons

Writing Cliffhangers

Jerry Phillips

Cliffhangers are story points which leave the reader in suspense. I recommend writing cliffhangers as a way of engaging students in the writing process. In this exercise students take three steps recommended by writing educators toward effective writing. First, they develop raw written material during several minutes of nonstop freewriting (Elbow, 1981). Second, they reread material, searching until they find a focus to develop further (Murray, 1987). Third, they publish a book when finished (Calkins, 1986). Here is a typical cliffhanger paragraph four students created:

The telephone rang, but Jana was afraid to move. She watched it patiently, hoping the ringing would stop, but it didn't. The noises outside grew louder and louder, and...

Jana leaped from the couch. The thunder sounded like a huge airplane tunneling through the apartment. Jana...

...picked up the phone, but never said a word. The deep voice on the other end said...

"What took you so long? I knew you were there." Jana felt tears roll down her cheek. Her father was on the line.

Students begin writing, establish a story line, leave it incomplete, and allow peers to read and extend the story.

Peers repeat this process until they exhaust the story line. The first student then has responsibility to edit the story. This exercise usually takes three class periods. The first day students select a topic and write a story for ten or fifteen minutes, develop a story line, and try to leave it hanging. Second, they place the unfinished story on a table somewhere in the classroom, and then select a peer's story. Third, peers read the unfinished story, further the story line, and leave the end hanging. Repeat this process until finished.

Next day return the cliff hangers to those who started the first paragraph, and tell them the cliff hanger story belongs to them. This may throw some off balance because they have never before heard this approach. Therefore, explaining they have complete control over their writing may be appropriate at this time. Allow students to take the stories home, make revisions thought necessary, such as rewriting into one cohesive story, and bring the revised ones back the next day.

The third day students allow peers to read the revised editions and make written suggestions for improvements. The original author may make several revisions before turning in an easy-to-read draft at the beginning of the fourth class. Finally, students use the fifth and sixth class periods to bind the cliffhangers into a book.

There are roadblocks to this exercise. Some students worry about their writing. They may not like the idea of writing cliffhangers. This distaste probably comes from a lack of writing experience, and arises because students are not sure how to start. Teachers must be patient because these students may not realize this is an enjoyable way to write until they are well into the project. Some students may

worry about pleasing others, not realizing that the purpose of the assignment is to let them write. Others may worry because they do not understand the editing process. Although teachers should explain there is more to the writing process than the first draft, students will still worry from the first because they do not know how to progress beyond a first draft. Others will want to edit as they write, continually focusing on making corrections. This is probably a carry-over from traditional instruction where the instructional stress is on writing conventions rather than fluency and creativity.

However, there are pleasures in this exercise. Students typically enjoy reading what peers have added. Some find it fun to try to add something exciting and interesting to their peers' story. Others may have had a hard time coming up with ideas for their paper, but will be full of ideas for expanding their peers' stories. Some students experience fulfillment later during the editing sessions, and become impressed with the difference between the original and final draft. Most students find satisfaction in publishing the book. Writing cliff-hangers can go a long way toward helping students change their attitudes toward writing.

References

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