

The Importance of the Pre-Writing Process

By Molly Harrison

A Classroom Overview:

Step into the first room of the eighth grade hallway of Southland Middle School, and you will find yourself in the typical classroom setting that has survived throughout the years: rows of desks, two-by-two, face the blackboard at the front of the room; the teacher's desk stands silently off to the side, speculating punishment with its stacks of detentions slips gathered at the ready; shelves of outdated, ragged books line the wall near the windows; motivational posters from the 1980s and '90s line the wall with quotes that students never read. I watch as students file in and out through the first and second hours of the day while I am at my placement, observing students who seem relatively comfortable in a classroom culture that has most likely been the status quo since they entered kindergarten.

My mentor teacher greets her students with a somewhat weary smile, filled with good intentions, but laced with thirty plus years of experience and the knowledge that she will be retiring in June. After pulling out the daily grammar exercise to put on the overhead, she starts to write the day's lesson on the blackboard:

"Today: Brainstorming sheet on hero essay due at the end of the hour"

She leans over to me and presents me with one of her "favorite" teaching instructional books, tells me to leaf through it, that it can give me some "great ideas". I flip open the cover to the first page: copyright 1982. This is not to say that good, effective writing instruction was not occurring in the '80s, but that as time proceeds, students' needs, interests, and ways of writing change. Writing an essay for school does not need to be confined to the linear completion of a five paragraph essay- it can, and should, be expanded to revolve around writing as an authentic means of communication.

What's Important?:

As many writing instruction practices claim, progressive scaffolding is an absolutely necessary step for students (or anyone, for that matter), when tackling a large writing assignment. This includes substantial time for brainstorming, outlining of ideas, and revisions. However, from my classroom placement observations, I have seen that these written, linear scaffolding techniques, while useful, are not always enough for students to effectively communicate through their writing. I believe that the brainstorming and pre-writing process must be recursive and dialogic through interaction with peers and the teacher; students must be able to revisit and rework their brainstorming and pre-writing through discussion with peers and the teacher, with a focus on "talking out" their ideas.

Writing is an extremely complex, social process and product; the author of a piece writes to a specific audience of readers (whether it be a teacher, peers, or a broader audience), and often expects some kind of feedback from this audience (or at

least, they should). This idea is firmly echoed in the National Council of Teachers of English (NCTE) beliefs about writing, where they believe writing has a “complex relationship to talk”. As I have discovered through my observations, an important aspect of this social writing process is for students to be able to effectively communicate their ideas with others; NCTE claims that:

“as they grow, writers still need opportunities to talk about what they are writing about, to rehearse the language of their upcoming texts and run ideas by trusted colleagues before taking the risk of committing words to paper. After making a draft, it is often helpful for writers to discuss with peers what they have done, partly in order to get ideas from their peers, partly to see what they, the writers, say when they try to explain their thinking”¹.

An important aspect of this social writing process is for students to be able to effectively communicate their ideas with others. However, before students sit down to write a full-length paper, it is important that they have the time to think about, and discuss, their ideas with others. This social, dialogic process of brainstorming and pre-writing is one very important key to writing an effective communicative piece; talking ideas out and receiving instant feedback allows students to see where the gaps or misunderstanding are in the sequence of their ideas, and helps to work with editing their ideas in relation to an authentic audience. It can be seen through the following classroom observations on writing instruction and student work how this dialogic process (or the absence of it) greatly affects students’ finished writing products.

The following analysis will be based off of the prior claims on writing incorporating the NCTE’s belief statement on writing as a “complex relationship to talk”. These observations have been accumulated over a span of seven months in my placement classroom, and include several artifacts of authentic student work. Many of the situations will be based on one-sided memories from myself as I reflect on the observations I was able to make during these class periods.

Assignment Prompts:

I chose to focus one aspect of my writing observations on an essay the students worked on both in and out of class, based on a personal hero. This assignment allows me to explore the ways a rigid, linear brainstorming process works for students as writers. For the purposes of this class assignment, I define a linear brainstorming process as work that is only being done to propel the writer towards the final draft- never allowing the students time to revisit and rework their ideas in the brainstorming process as they write.

For this assignment, the students were asked to complete the following steps for an essay on a personal hero:

- Complete a brainstorming “house” (See figure 1.1) sheet on their selected hero.
- Complete a rough draft of the five paragraph paper in class.
- Complete a peer editing sheet for one of their peers’ papers, and have their paper edited by another student.
- Include their notes on transition verbs with their final copy of the paper.

- Include 3 transition verbs in their final drafts.
- Type/neatly write a final copy to be handed in.

The instruction for this essay unit began with the students taking notes on the topic of what a “hero” is. The teacher had made these notes herself, providing the criteria on what made a person a hero or not. They were presented on an overhead, and there was no discussion included in the process; the criteria that was provided was non-negotiable.

As a contrast to the prior writing observation, I will also focus an observation on a “love story” assignment from the same class. This assignment was structured as the monthly “free write” for the students, and I was able to work closely with a group of five students to help them complete their stories. The structure of the love story was a short prompt that asked the students to focus on an object/person/idea etc. that they (or a made-up, fictional character) loved. The story’s only requirements were:

- The story described a situation about love.
- The final edition was at least two pages.

There was no in-class time to work on this piece, but the time I spent working with my group of five students was due to their lack of completing the activity on time (the teacher allowed them to work on it in class to make up the points towards the end of the card marking).

When working with these five students for the short amount of class time that was provided to us, I used an open-forum discussion in the library between myself and the five students. This opportunity allowed me to experiment with out-loud brainstorming and peer editing, and allowed me to see the immediate results based on talking as a pre-writing activity.

Section 1: The Hero Essay

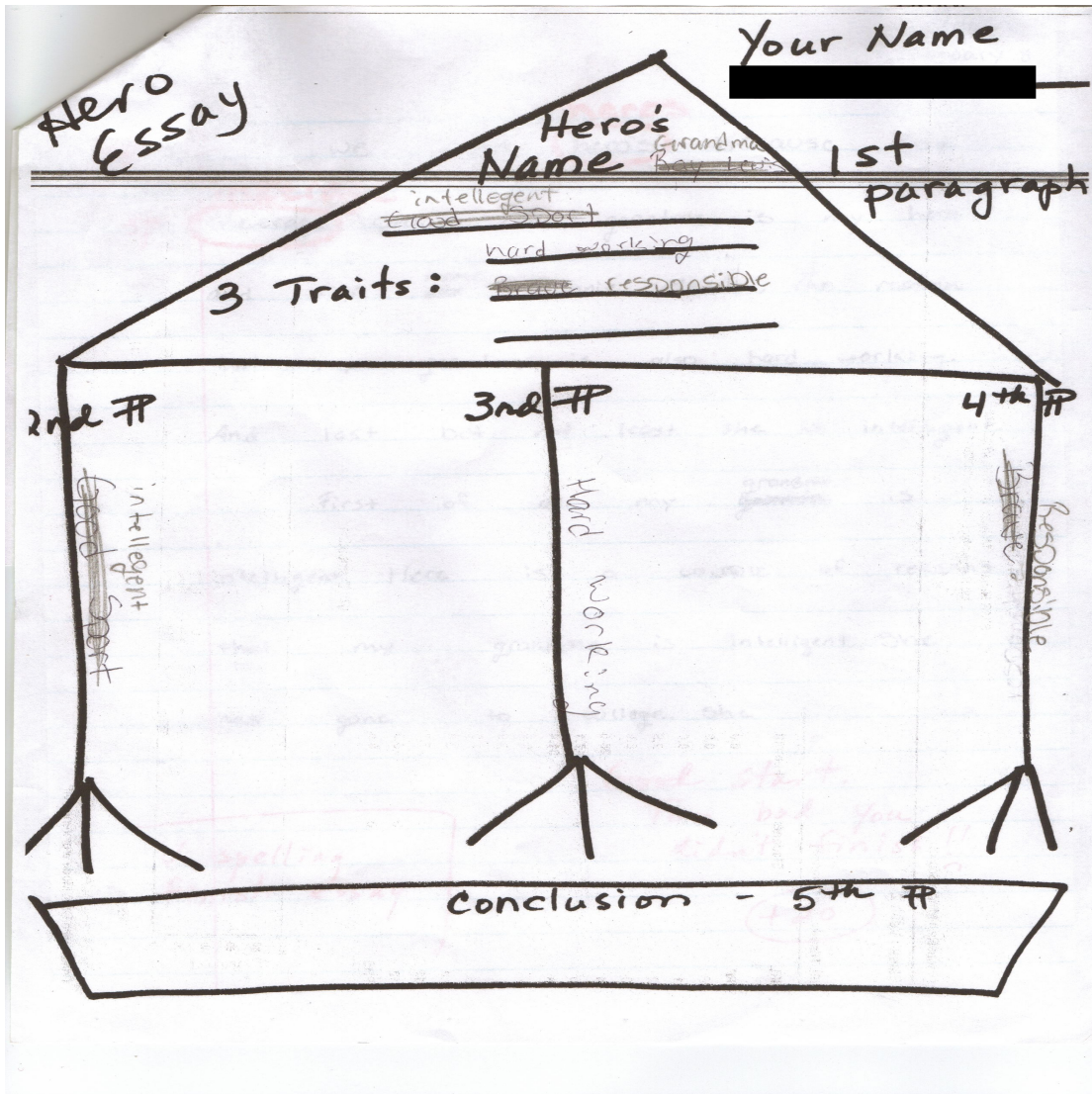
Brainstorming Observations: The brainstorming for the hero essay begins with the teacher modeling the brainstorming house she wants the students to use for this activity. She places a transparency on the overhead that is an exact replica of the house the students have at their desks, shuts off the lights, and asks the students to draw their attention to her example. Here, her house is already filled in with an abundance of neat, elegant handwriting. She quickly goes over her house to explain the different sections they will have to fill in for each paragraph, and mentions that she filled hers out about her father.

The students’ pre-writing then begins by allowing them to choose a person in their life that they think fits the teacher’s criteria of a hero. They are asked to think of 3 major traits that fit their hero (provided that the traits are ones found in the aforementioned notes on heroes). The process of choosing their hero is a brief, silent one, and is immediately segued into working on their houses without a recursive or dialogic discussion on who it was they chose or why. Brainstorming houses are distributed to the students, and they are asked to work on them individually for the remainder of the hour, which leaves the students with approximately ten minutes of

work time. For the first five minutes, the students move seats to sit by friends (even though they were told by the teacher that the assignment was individual work), talk to their friends about unrelated topics, and briefly glance at the worksheet. Several students have questions, which are addressed by my mentor teacher and myself, and several students begin to fill their sheets out. Throughout the remainder of the class, students talk to one another, and casually fill out their houses; at the end of the period, very few have the house completely full, some have it partially filled, and many have only their hero's name at the top.

Brainstorming Analysis: As my mentor teacher models her example for the class, there is a clear gap of communication between her and the students; her chart has been filled out prior to this class, the students miss the opportunity to see how the teacher brainstormed her ideas. This preparation causes the loss of the opportunity to communicate her methods of thinking to her students. This lack of “talk” when filling out the model of the brainstorming house does not model for students the ways in which effective brainstorming takes place with a seasoned writer, and therefore leaves many students wondering how the teacher came up with such elaborate ideas on her hero.

Figure 1.1 is a student's “final” brainstorming sheet that they turned in at the completion of the project. As you can see, the student has obvious blanks on a majority of his chart, yet he has continued through the writing process to work on his rough and final drafts with only this in hand. This particular student is very quiet during class, his long hair aiding in his ability to never meet the teacher's eye, and he has never asked for help from a teacher when working (even if the help might be needed). In classrooms as large as thirty-five students, it was easy for both the teacher and myself to skip students such as this one who were not explicitly asking for help completing the assignment. This lack of communication between the teachers and students left the students wondering about the assignment, not knowing how to go about filling out the seemingly simple house; and at the end of the hour, many students' houses looked like Figure 1.1.



(Figure 1.1)

Rough Draft Observations: The incomplete brainstorming houses pose problems for many students as they advance into writing their rough drafts during the next class period; many of the students do not have a brainstorming outline to go off of, but they are required to start silently writing their drafts. Instruction on the rough draft writing day is minimal, the teacher has a list of what the students should include, posted on the blackboard (a written outline of a five paragraph essay), along with a single printed sheet of transition words that they should incorporate as they write.

As I walk around the room reading students' work, I notice that many of the students who did not have time to finish their brainstorming are having difficulties beginning their papers. Worried about the lack of time they have to write, I push them to begin their introductory paragraphs; I tell them that it's simple, they just need to start the first paragraph by saying why they need heroes in their lives, and

introduce their hero. For many, this means truly thinking about their heroes for the first time. I do not ask them very many questions, I simply try to push them to start the introductory paragraph, and decide which transition verb to use in the next paragraph.

The second aspect of the rough draft process is the peer editing/evaluation portion of the paper. The teacher hands out a 3x5 sheet of paper to each group of students, and asks them to silently read one another's papers and fill out the sheet. The sheet includes:

- Circling grammar/spelling errors.
- Giving three comments about what they "liked".
- Giving three ways to "improve" the paper.
- Giving their peer a preliminary grade on their paper.

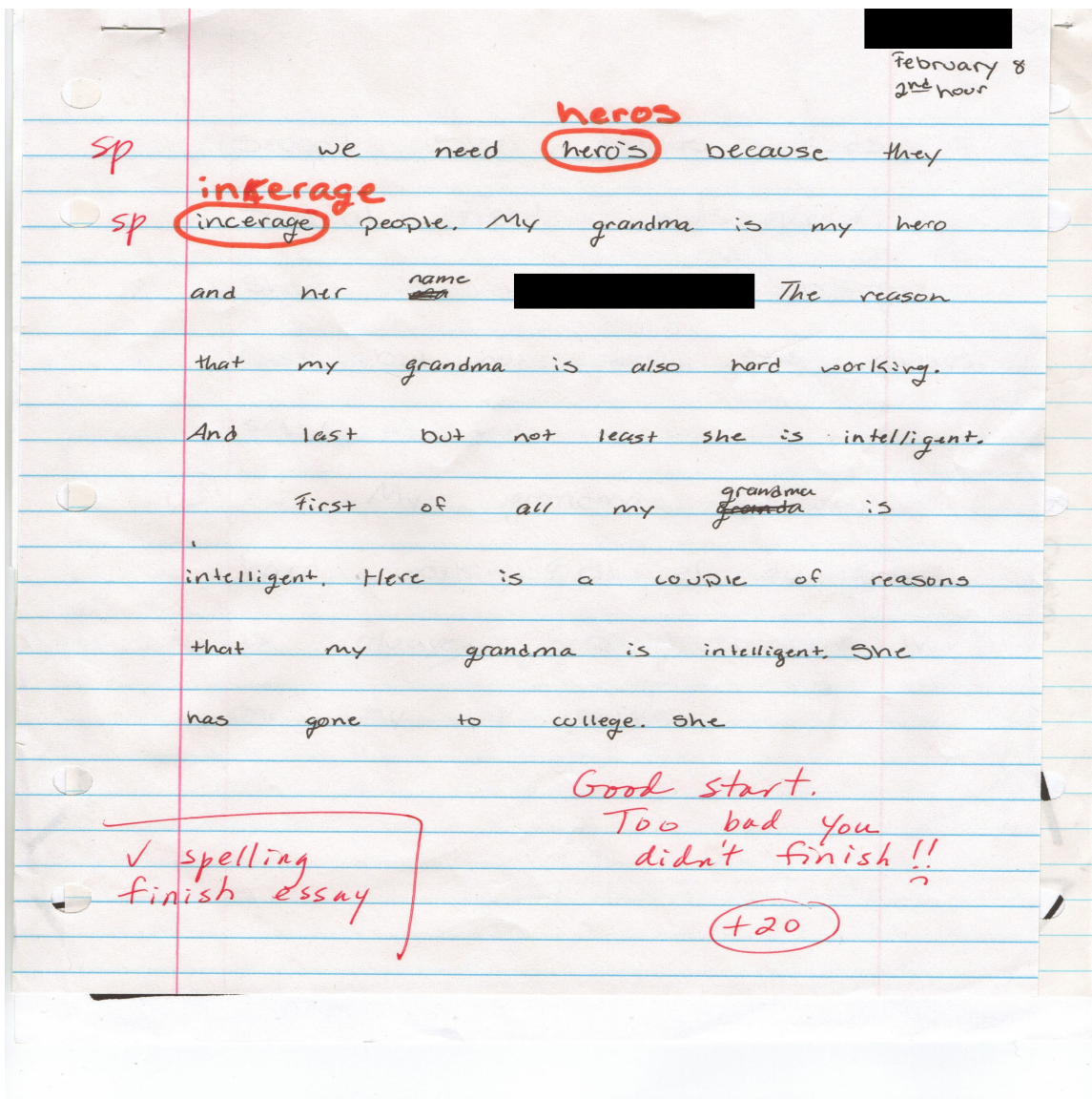
After this process is over, the students give the papers back to one another, and the class period is over; there is no time to discuss ideas with one another, and the evaluation sheet gets shoved into a folder- never to be seen again until they have to staple it to the final draft.

Rough Draft Analysis: As I pushed the students to focus on getting something, anything, down for their first paragraph- I don't ask them to elaborate their thinking through the paper as a whole, I only ask them to focus on the immediate paragraph they are working on so that they can "get it done". In doing so, I deprive the students the opportunity to explore telling me how they see the whole paper going, and I force them into the narrow scope of one paragraph. For many students, this may have resulted in a complete introductory paragraph, but it did not help them see the paper as a whole.

The problematic focus of the linear progression from the brainstorming house, to rough draft, to final draft is echoed in *Literacy: Writing, Processes and Teaching* by David Wray. In his article, Wray claims that "the problem with stage descriptions of writing is that they model the growth of the written product, not the inner processes of the person producing it"ⁱⁱⁱ. In retrospect, I can see how my pushing the students to produce one paragraph at a time only focused on the processes of the product, not the process of the actual writing.

Final Draft Observations: On the day the paper is due, many students turn in incomplete papers (some still in their rough draft form, never revised), such as the students' paper in Figure 1.2. After going through the folder of each students' hero essay in my first and second hours, I notice a surprising trend: students with papers (see Figure 1.2) that are incomplete or very short, are *always* lacking a complete brainstorming house (and some don't even have a house attached).

Final Draft Analysis: The correlation between incomplete brainstorming houses and incomplete final drafts shows me how important it is for students to be able to brainstorm and talk about their ideas before they enter into the drafting of their papers. In focusing on a rigid, linear method of brainstorming, pre-writing and drafting, students do not have the time to look at the paper recursively and discuss their ideas- they must forever keep looking forward to the end goal of the "final" draft. By keeping this linear progression of writing, the students who did not have time to brainstorm, or could not enter into the process of brainstorming due to a lack of communicative discussion, could not produce an effectively complete final draft.



(Figure 1.2) Comments in red marker made by student, comments in thin, red pen made by the classroom teacher.

Section 2: Brainstorming for the Love Story

Brainstorming Observations: The brainstorming session that was held with my group for the love story began as an open discussion between myself and all of the students. I read the prompt provided by the teacher out-loud to the students, and I began the discussion by asking questions on the prompt before passing out paper and pencils. These first questions were asked to the group at large so that every student could participate.

Some questions that were asked to each student as they began their paper:

- Do you want the story to be about yourself, or someone you make up?
- Do you want the story to be love between two people, or an object?

- What does love mean to you?
- What do you like about love? What do you dislike about it?

Two of my students decided to write fictional love stories, whereas the three other students decided to focus on their love of special hobbies. After each student decided on their topic, I passed out their paper and pencils, and let them write for a while.

As they began writing the first few sentences of their stories, I walked around individually to each student and read his or her work. After a brief glance at what their story was about, I would ask them where they saw their story going. Two students could answer right away- they were able to verbally explain what they wanted to happen to their characters through the beginning to the end of their stories, and they set to work. The other three students, however, struggled with the question; as they began their stories, they weren't sure where they would end up. I admitted to them that this isn't always a bad strategy, that writing without an idea of the ending can be exciting and authentic, but having a plan in mind makes writing a lot easier. I then decided to ask them authentic questions about their hobbies to get them brainstorming ideas on where they want the story to go. Some questions that I asked were:

- When is the first time you can remember partaking in your favorite hobby?
- Is there someone important or special to you that influenced you to try this hobby, or that you do the hobby with?
- Have you ever been frustrated with the hobby?
- What's the best memory you have of doing this hobby?

These questions are real, authentic questions- I wanted to know the answers. The students could tell that I wanted to know more about the topic they were writing about, which caused them to launch into stories: one boy told me about the first time he went hunting with his father, and how interesting it was to get up early, drive to their destination, and clean the guns together; another talked to me about his love for skateboarding, and a time where he fell and broke open both knees, where he still has scars to show. Both of these students then had stories to write about, and they acknowledged that they had a starting and end point in mind to write with. The third boy couldn't seem to answer the questions I posed to him, but when as he listened to one of his peers talking about the first time he went hunting, the third boy began to tell me a story about how much he loved going up North with his family and cooking venison for dinner after he and his father go hunting- this boy then had a story to tell.

Brainstorming Analysis: By asking these pre-writing questions to the group as a whole (before passing out any writing materials) it allowed other students to hear the brainstorming process of their peers, and allowed them to reflect on their own pieces at the same time. This activity helped my students brainstorm ideas for topics before ever setting pencil to paper, allowing them to have a clear idea of what to write on before committing to their written word. This sentiment is often felt by many of my students, who get frustrated when their thoughts get jumbled as they write, and they feel that they must start the paper over because it isn't "working"- this pre-writing activity helped ease some of the pressure off of starting the paper, and allowed students to think before committing.

As the students wrote, asking them “where do you see this going?” caused each and every student to take a step back from what they are writing; you could see the gears at work in their brains as their face becomes puzzled, and they think about how they are going to work their story. This dialogic, authentic question helped students to rationalize an outline before they continued writing the paper, and allowed them to try out different endings to make sure the logic of their story ended in an effective manner.

Rough/Final Draft Observations: For the purposes of this assignment, my group of five students did not have time to write a complete rough draft and revise it to complete a final draft; as the students worked and re-worked their pieces in the allotted time, they were forced to turn in their work as a “final” draft to their teacher. As with the beginnings of the papers, I continue to walk around to each individual student and ask questions about their writing; when one student gets stuck, I ask another student at the table how they could see the story ending, and students start to share ideas. By the end of our allotted forty-five minutes, each student has at least one and a half pages of writing completed, and several students have more than two pages.

Rough/Final Draft Analysis: Although our limited time may have forced these students to rush through some of their thoughts, I am struck at how developed and cohesive their stories are. For three of my students, it’s the first time I’ve ever collected work from them. For the two others, it is some of the best work I’ve ever seen them produce. The cohesiveness and logical transitions that occur in their stories is an exact replica of the stories that they voiced to me as I questioned them aloud about where the story was going. For the first time, I am able to see these students’ authentic, personal voices transcribed onto paper in the form of writing.

This productivity is in large part due to the effective authenticity of the communication in their writing; by talking to an audience recursively about their ideas as they wrote, they were able to communicate their story before ever writing it down, making the writing process much more tangible for these students.

To return once more to David Wray’s *Literacy: Writing, Processes and Teaching*, he claims that “a more accurate model of the composing process would need to recognize those basic thinking processes which unite planning and revision”ⁱⁱ. In being able to talk through their stories, the students were able to take on a composing process that allowed them to plan and revise as they wrote, allowing them to focus on the process of writing the story, not just the product.

Conclusion:

When I began my observations in this classroom, I was worried I would have nothing to report on about successful writing; students in this class are very reluctant writers, and more than one has told me that English is their least favorite subject because of how much they have to write. However, looking at writing as a means and process of communication has given a new light to my findings during my observations; I find myself exploring ways in which students communicate with one another and with the teacher through writing, and what it means when they *aren’t* participating in this communication.

I have found that it is often the case that students aren't *prepared* to enter into this written form of communication, and they need dialogic brainstorming/feedback as a means of pre-writing to begin their process. As the NCTE believes talking is a tool for writing, they also claim that "from its beginnings in early childhood through the most complex setting imaginable, writing exists in a nest of talk", showing that sometimes we have to take it back to where it begins, and talk it out.

ⁱ "NCTE Beliefs about the Teaching of Writing." *National Council of Teachers of English - Homepage*. Web. 03 Apr. 2011. <<http://www.ncte.org/positions/statements/writingbeliefs>>.

ⁱⁱ Wray, David. "Literacy: Writing, Processes and ..." *Google Books*. Web. 11 Apr. 2011. <<http://books.google.com/books?id=eFdrzKWyl8IC>>