



Cohesive Writing—The Method is an excerpt from *Cohesive Writing: Why Concept Is Not Enough* by Carol Jago.

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When we describe something as “cohesive” we mean that the thing holds together, that separate pieces stick or cling firmly to one another to create the whole. In the physical world cohesion is the force that holds molecules together. The architect Frank Lloyd Wright drew up cohesive building plans, balancing form and function to create livable houses that were also works of art. The artful hostess brings together people likely to interest one another around a bountiful table in order to create a cohesive dinner party. The gardener places shrubs and flowers with attention to height, color, and seasonal glory, carefully considering how each element adds to the cohesiveness of the whole. So it is with cohesive writing. Writers wrestle with ideas, balance form and function, push words this way and that, take care with syntax and diction, and employ imagery and metaphor until a cohesive message emerges.

Though full of promise, student writing typically lacks cohesion. As a result, their messages are garbled. Parts of student essays may sparkle, but the whole is seldom “harmoniously accordant” (*The Oxford English Dictionary’s* definition for *coherent*). Discord and cacophony better describe many of my students’ initial products. The fault is not in the stars or in the students but in ourselves. Our methods of teaching writing lack cohesion. Within the same English Department, one teacher’s writing program may consist entirely of personal journals while down the hall another assigns five-paragraph essays. No wonder students are confused. On the pages that follow, I present an effective

approach for helping students write cohesively and produce written work in which the different aspects of their writing hold together fast. It is not a lockstep lesson plan or simple recipe. It is an organized, coherent method that works.

Getting Started

In her book, *Bird by Bird: Some Instructions on Writing and Life* (1994), Anne Lamott tells a story about her brother, ten at the time, who was working on a bird report that he had had three months to write. It was due the next morning. (This story will sound familiar to any parent of a ten-year-old boy.) Sitting at the kitchen table, surrounded by paper and pencils and a pile of books on birds, he was paralyzed by the hugeness of the task and close to tears. Anne's father sat down beside him, put an arm around his shoulder and said, "Bird by bird, buddy. Just take it bird by bird."

I know no better advice for young writers. Most of my students who don't complete their work for class are afflicted with the same paralysis. It is not that they can't do the assignment. It is not that they don't want to do the assignment. They just can't figure out where to begin. Inertia, rather than indolence, keeps those pages blank.

When I ask such students why their papers are late, they often shrug and assure me they are working on them. This is not a lie. They are. They just can't bring themselves to make the first mark on the page. I believe that these students who appear to be the class "flakes," may in fact be the class perfectionists, unwilling to write a single word until they are sure it's the best word.

In *Bird by Bird*, Anne Lamott lays out a series of lessons to help writers mired in the slough of perfectionism. She recommends starting small. Instead of beginning with an outline for a due-tomorrow term paper or a cast of characters for the Great American Novel, she advises students to write as much as they can see through a one-inch picture frame. One paragraph. One point. One bird.

E. L. Doctorow, National Book Award-winning author of *Ragtime*, said, "writing a novel is like driving a car at night. You can see only as far as your headlights, but you can make the whole trip this way."

For students paralyzed by the thought of a 1,000-word essay, such advice is liberating. Don't worry about all 1,000 words. Write the first 50, and the remaining 950 will follow. You can always revise them later.

Physicists use the term *inertia* to describe the property of matter in which it continues in its existing state, whether at rest or in motion, unless altered by an external force. I often have students use an inertia exercise, having them write nonstop for fifteen minutes. If they run out of things to say, I tell them to recopy the last word over and over until a new one comes to mind. I remind students that such free-form writing is not what I expect to see on their finished papers, but that what we have done is exerted an external force on their static inertia. Once their words begin flowing, inertia of motion takes over.

Question Papers

Another method that helps students get started when writing about a piece of literature is a question paper. I am fairly certain that Claire Pelton was the originator of this lesson, but as with so many good teaching ideas, over the years it has gone through the sausage-maker in my brain and emerged in a somewhat different form.

Writing responses to literature, while not one of the three NAEP writing types (narrative, informative, and persuasive), commonly appears as part of state and district writing assessments. In California, students are asked to write a response to literature both at the seventh-grade level and as part of an exit exam. This is also one of the most common writing assignments in high school. Given that the content of most English classes is literature, it makes sense that teachers would assign such papers. For many students, such writing seems very removed from their lives—school for school's sake at its worst; consequently, such essays are often the worst that students write all semester. Parroting what the teacher told them about *Romeo and Juliet* or *Lord of the Flies*, students patch together unrelated points, cobble together a few quotes, and type the whole thing up hoping it will pass muster.

You can make writing about literature more authentic by having students begin with their own questions. The Question Paper assignment encourages students to generate questions about the poem or

story they plan to analyze and then to posit possible, tentative answers to their own questions. The task is much easier to model for students than to explain so I offer them the following question paper based upon Lord Byron's "She Walks in Beauty." I purposely choose this text because students find it appealing yet relatively opaque. I want to show them how questioning the text can help a writer figure out what needs to be said about the poem.

She Walks in Beauty

I

She walks in beauty, like the night,
Of cloudless climes and starry skies;
And all that's best of dark and bright
Meet in her aspect and her eyes:
Thus mellowed to that tender light
Which heaven to gaudy day denies.

II

One shade the more, one ray the less,
Had half impaired the nameless grace
Which waves in every raven tress,
Or softly lightens o'er her face;
Where thoughts serenely sweet express
How pure, how dear their dwelling place.

III

And on that cheek, and o'er that brow,
So soft, so calm, yet so eloquent,
The smiles that win, the tints that glow,
But tell of days in goodness spent,
A mind at peace with all below,
A heart whose love is innocent!

Model Question Paper on "She Walks in Beauty"

I really like the sound of the first line about walking in beauty "like the night," but I'm not really sure why beauty should be anything like the night at all. OK, Byron says there are starry skies and so I guess the stars shine in her eyes but couldn't he also be saying that the girl looks better in the dark? I mean maybe the night covers up

her blemishes or something. I guess not because he has a really gentle line to describe this, “mellowed to that tender night.” I wonder if what he means by comparing this to “gaudy day” is like seeing someone in really harsh fluorescent light. What is he talking about in the second stanza though? I don’t get what this “one shade the more and one ray the less” means except that he likes her black hair a lot. Maybe he’s saying that the look on her face is so sweet because her thoughts are so happy to be inside a beautiful head. I don’t know. Maybe not. Maybe the poet is saying that she is such a fundamentally good person, inside and out, mind and heart, that she cannot help but “walk in beauty.”

Together we read the poem and the model question paper. I then ask students how writing this paper seemed to help the student understand the poem. My students always see how questioning the text allowed the reader to explore the piece of literature without worrying about being right or wrong. I make sure they notice how the writer revises early interpretations, pushing himself to understand more clearly what the poem is saying. A question paper is a kind of dialogue between the writer and himself.

We make a list on the board of the kinds of questions and sentence openers that encourage thoughtfulness and stimulate unexpected answers:

- I wonder . . .
- How?
- Why?
- Maybe . . .
- It’s possible that . . .

Students then break up into small groups, each with a different poem as the impetus for a question paper. Sometimes we use six different poems by the same author. Other times I choose six poems on a similar theme or subject. Students read the poem aloud, write for fifteen minutes nonstop (I let them go for twenty if the class seems really engaged in their writing), and then share what they have written

in their groups. I encourage them to let the read-around lead to conversation about the poem. This isn't a case where we are looking for the "best" paper but rather an exercise in letting one idea fuel another.

At the end of class, I bring everyone together for a metacognitive dialogue. It is not enough that students should walk away saying "Whew, that wasn't too bad." I want them to understand *why* we did what we did. If they haven't internalized the idea that writing a question paper can help them write more thoughtfully about literature, I have merely kept them busy for an hour. What I'm trying to teach them about writing is much bigger than this. I hope they gain an approach for getting started on a paper. Usually they do.

Ms. Jago: So what happened when you started writing with your own questions?

Ryan: It was good. Easy. I've always got questions. It's the answers that I'm not so good at.

Anoushka: But I was in your group, Ryan, and you ended up answering all your questions. What I can't understand is how we answered questions that what we didn't know we knew the answers to.

Ryan: Yeah. And the hard questions were the best ones to try to answer. We had Adrienne Rich's "Aunt Jennifer's Tigers," and I was clueless at first about the tigers being creatures in the rug or whatever but as soon as I wrote, "What does wool and needles have to do with tigers?" I got it. It's weird.

Brent: Well, we had a really hard poem, Margaret Atwood's "This Is a Photograph of Me" and I just wrote a whole list of questions before I tried to answer any of them. But the questions changed. I think you tricked us, Mrs. Jago.

Ms. Jago: What do you mean, "Tricked you"?

Brent: You know, like getting us to keep going back to the poem for another question. Every time I went back I had to reread a line or two. Very tricky.

Anoushka: I did that too!

Ms. Jago: And maybe your questions “changed” as you say, Brent, because you saw more in the line the second time around. Do you think this was a good way of getting started? If I asked you to write a short essay on this poem tonight [*huge groans*]*—*wait, I’m not asking you to do this, only to consider the idea. If I assigned an essay on this poem, do you think you would have a place to begin?

Ryan: This would be better than if you just handed us the poems with one of your hard questions. But I’m glad we don’t have to write an essay tonight.

Moving from Freewriting to Drafting

Students often confuse such “freewriting” exercises with a first draft. My students like writing question papers so much that they periodically ask if they can write one instead of an essay. I say “yes and no.” Yes, they can use a question paper to discover what it is they have to say about the book and generate a thesis. No, the essay must appear in traditional form, developing from thesis through analysis and evidence to conclusion. It is important to help students distinguish between writing that helps them explore what it is that they have to say and a first attempt at an essay. In many ways a “quickwrite” and question papers are antithetical to the conventional expository essay. Instead of arguing a position, the writer takes up many, sometimes conflicting, positions. I believe that this kind of informal writing helps students to generate much richer and more cohesive products.

In this student sample, the writer explores her questions about Amy Tan’s *The Joy Luck Club* and suggests an interesting idea for a thesis for her essay.

Question Paper on *The Joy Luck Club*

All through this book I have still been wondering about that daughter’s mother in the first chapter. Before she died, she told her daughter about two children she had in China but was forced to leave them in the middle of the road because times were getting

unbearable. I wonder what ever happened to these children who must be June's sisters or brothers. Does June often wonder about them? Did the mother ever wonder about the fate of her two forgotten children? Are they even alive? I know that if I had two siblings somewhere I would do anything in my power to find them because I would have so much curiosity.

Maybe the reason the mother never tried to find them is because those memories are very painful to her and she feels guilty for abandoning two children, then going to a new land to have more. She probably felt that at least her daughter has a right to know about them but she (the mother) made it clear that she didn't want to find them and would never help her to find them. Maybe it is this untold story that creates the tension between mother and daughter that plays out in all kinds of ways in the book.

—Marni Kamins, tenth grade

I don't know that Marni would have discovered such an intriguing idea had she been worried about syntax, diction, evidence, and organization. Inviting her to write freely about the book before sitting down to a first draft, helped her find a thesis that interested her. Suddenly writing about literature was less artificial, more authentic.

Prompts That Stimulate Thoughtful Response

Such a self-constructed response to literature is not the only kind of writing middle and high school teachers should be assigning. In order to prepare students for various writing assessments as well as real-world writing tasks, students must also be taught how to respond to a set prompt.

Many of my reluctant scholars prefer that I should be the one to set the question. I have also found that, left on their own, students seem to revert to a book-report type of response instead of analysis—as in this opening paragraph of a finished essay on Sylvia Plath's *The Bell Jar* by a struggling tenth-grade student, Alicia Escalera.

The Bell Jar by Sylvia Plath is an interesting novel. It is interesting in the way it is presented and the unique characters. The main char-

acter, Esther goes crazy and brings the reader in as if they are there. The reader learns a new perspective on certain subjects such as children, marriage (sic), etc.

This student would, I believe, have benefited from a prompt that directed her thinking toward analysis. Alicia has ideas about the novel, but without a prompt to direct her, she is currently only able describe what happens and then how these events affect her. Rather than probing the causes of the main character's behavior, she wrote, "I began to feel sorry for her, and it felt as if I was a friend of hers." The final sentence of this essay convinced me that this student had had powerful personal response to Sylvia Plath, yet what she wrote was almost incoherent:

To just stop and look at things, ideas and even if you don't like them, or they scare you, stop and explore them you will be a knowledgeable person and make good decisions because you will know all the bad and all the good about the situation.

Years of reading student papers make me certain that while this paper was meant to be the final version of a multidraft assignment, Alicia had dashed it off the night before. Having thirty-six students in the class hampers me from checking that every piece in the process is in place. Even with this caveat, I believe that Alicia and many other students like her would benefit from a carefully crafted prompt.

A team of researchers from the Educational Testing Service and the National Writing Project reviewed classroom writing samples collected as part of the 1998 NAEP writing test in order to analyze the state of writing instruction throughout the nation. Speaking at a June 26, 2001, roundtable discussion of their research at the Council of Chief State School Officers' annual conference, Barbara Storms and Claudia Gentile posited that constructing an assignment that elicits good writing may be as difficult for teachers as writing the essays is for their students. The research indicated that teachers must strike a balance between giving students too much and too little choice in writing prompts. The topics should engage students in complex thinking

and clearly indicate the intended audience for the piece of writing. In an in-depth study of writing samples, researchers discovered that “the quality of a teacher’s assignment could determine the quality of students’ writing” (Hoff 2001).

Joan and Craig Cotich, who are respectively a high school teacher and university instructor in Santa Barbara, California, have made an art of creating good writing prompts. Their analysis of the questions teachers typically ask provided me with insight into how to do a better job with this important piece of the puzzle. In an article for *California English*, they wrote:

Without a prompt that clearly invites an argument and a developed support of that argument, students become confused about the “essay” and what it entails. A great prompt will not guarantee a great essay, but it will help students understand the kind of writing expected from them.

Essays are difficult enough to write, and a good prompt will help students more clearly see the purpose of an assignment. As we analyzed teacher prompts for essays, we recognized some patterns in problematic essay prompts: they were often too long; they were assigned to test knowledge; they asked for a re-telling of a story; they did not ask for the development of a thesis; they asked too many questions; or they asked for description of plot, character, or setting.

Below are two prompts that we analyzed and then revised.

Prompt No. 1

Courage is a characteristic that is praised in *To Kill a Mockingbird*. How are different aspects of courage illustrated through different incidents in the novel? What different definitions of courage do we learn? What is your final definition of courage?

This asks for a definition essay, in which students will explain how their conceptions of the word “courage” were re-defined or just slightly changed by Harper Lee’s novel. As the question is now framed, though, students must follow a three-step process before arriving at the final demand of the essay.

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The first question asks students to describe the different “aspects” of courage in the novel, and most likely, students will believe that this is their first task rather than a step in a process. Students, then, relate incidents in the story where courage is illustrated, but they do not incorporate this step into the other two. If students treated this single question as the essay question, they would come up with a thesis that focused on Harper Lee’s conception of courage.

The next question builds on the first, in that the question is targeted more toward students than toward Harper Lee. It now asks for a more “objective” definition of courage, demonstrated by the use of the word “we.” Students here come up with various definitions of courage, and these definitions do not necessarily refer back to the incidents in the novel where courage is illustrated. Students often do not see the relation between these first two questions, and this is partly because they are framed as separate questions that do not reference each other. These first two sentences could easily be combined so that the student clearly sees that each type of courage defined must be supported with evidence from the text.

We believe that the last question is the most important question because it asks students to arrive at a final definition of courage, assuming that Lee’s novel has reformulated their initial definition of courage. This last question also presumes that students will contrast their initial definition of courage with their “final” definition of courage. But this final question shifts the focus from the “we” to the “you,” and students may again view this shift as a call for a separate answer rather than for a unified answer.

Students treat this prompt as a three-part response, and they do not come up with a single thesis statement that incorporates all three questions into a single answer. To elicit a better response, we rewrote the prompt as seen below.

REWRITE: In *To Kill A Mockingbird*, Harper Lee reformulates (changes) the meaning of courage. How is courage re-defined in the novel?

This single question captures the essence of the assignment—it asks students to recognize that Lee plays with and ultimately changes our conception of courage. Students are asked to state *how* courage is re-defined, and this will involve showing *how* the author does this.

Showing how, or illustrating how, the author does this involves bringing in examples from the text. Writing a Directive above the prompt such as “Incorporate examples from the novel to support your claims,” will ensure that this is done.

Prompt No. 2

What is the significance of the title *To Kill a Mockingbird*? Choose two characters who represent “mockingbirds” in the novel and explain how they relate to the importance of the title. Use specific textual examples to show why each character is considered a “mockingbird.” Which citizens of Maycomb learn lessons from these “mockingbirds,” and what lessons do they learn?

Here is an example of a schizophrenic prompt. This prompt asks four different questions, and each of these could sustain an essay. The first question asks for an analysis of the title in relation to the text. This is a good question, but it is extremely general. Students can take this question in many different directions, depending on their interpretation of the novel. For teachers who do not want to read 20 papers that sound the same, this general prompt may be appealing. For those teachers looking for something more uniform, this prompt may not be the best choice.

The second question is much more specific in terms of direction. Students know they must choose two characters and then show how these characters “represent” mockingbirds. This demands a two-fold interpretation.

1. Students must first interpret the meaning of mockingbirds in the novel.
2. They must analyze two characters according to how well they conform to the characteristics or symbolism of the mockingbird. We believe that this question is the best of the three.

The third sentence is repetitive, since this guideline is already stated in the Directions. It is best to avoid writing rules or guidelines within the prompt itself, for this distracts students from the goal of the prompt: to clearly understand what is being asked of them.

The last sentence includes a third and fourth question. These last two questions are subordinate to the first two questions, but because these come last, students may interpret these last questions as the most important. Students will probably include parts of the last questions in answering either of the first two, but this prompt structure will confuse the reader.

REWRITE: Harper Lee uses the theme of “mockingbirds” throughout the novel. Choose two characters who best represent mockingbirds, and explain why these two characters are likened to mockingbirds.

Below is a prompt for you to analyze on your own. We have provided some criticism of the prompt, but try to critique the prompt on your own and see what you come up with.

Prompt No. 3

There are many contrasting definitions of what makes “good folks” in *To Kill a Mockingbird*. Choose three characters who have different definitions of what makes “good folks,” and explain their opinions. What do you think is the author’s message? What is *your* opinion about what makes “good folks”?

- The real thesis question is the last line. This question asks for three very different things in terms of how a student will answer them.
- The first command asks for an essay that could become a compare/contrast essay if the task is to analyze the similarities and differences between these different characters’ conception of “good folks.”
- The first question asks for the student to interpret the characters’ feelings and thoughts about good folks, and this question presumably asks the student to interpret the author’s intent.
- The second question is ambiguous. The author’s message *when?*
- The last question is the best because it will involve (at least partially) answering all of the above questions.

I have begun asking myself the following questions whenever I write a prompt:

- Does the question invite reflection and analysis or have I simply asked students to retell the story?
- Does the prompt invite many possible responses or does there seem to be only one correct answer?
- Does the prompt send students back to the text for evidence?
- Have I indulged in my own multiple interpretations of the text and written so many questions that students have no idea where to begin?

The College Board’s AP Language and AP Literature prompts offer excellent models. While they often need to be purged of literary terminology for younger or less academic students, these prompts have been carefully designed to elicit the kind of analysis that I believe all students are capable of writing.

It may seem an impossible task, but I often write personalized prompts for students. Knowing how much or how little guidance an individual student needs to get started, I craft each prompt with a particular writer in mind. This works better when students are writing on many different outside reading books rather than on a novel we are studying as a class because kids can’t “shop” prompts and then make assumptions about how I view them as writers. Of course I save these seemingly one-of-a-kind prompts for future use. For Alicia’s next essay, on *My Ántonia*, I wrote:

**Specially Designed Prompt for Alicia Escalera
on Willa Cather’s *My Ántonia***

How did Ántonia and Jim’s friendship lend focus to Cather’s novel?
Write an essay in which you explain how learning about one another
helped both characters learn about themselves.

Not only did Alicia write a much more focused and cohesive essay on this novel than she did for *The Bell Jar*, but in June she chose the *My Ántonia* essay from her portfolio as an example of how she had grown

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as a writer over the course of the year. A luminous phrase from her essay still rings in my ears: “Jim and *Ántonia* help each other grow their separate ways together.” Teachers of writing cannot assume that one method of getting started will work for all students. We have to take students where they are and provide the scaffolding they need to improve. Some will need more direction than others. We must help them grow their separate ways.

