Applied Practice

Master Classes
Writing Lessons from Great Authors

MASTER LEVEL

Robert Cremins, M.A.
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*Suggested responses are included for the practices in these lessons.
A NOTE FOR TEACHERS

We have created the Master Classes series based on the premise that teachers and students can find no better examples of excellence in writing than those provided by the literature they are studying. The “master-examples” in each lesson are therefore drawn from the masterpieces commonly read on the relevant grade-level. As a particular text may or not be on an individual class’s reading list, we have provided a brief context for each quotation. This avoids confusion and allows students to concentrate on the quality of the writing.

To enable students to learn the most about the particular writing skill highlighted, each of the twelve lessons has the following format:

- A definition, which succinctly explains the meaning of the writing skill under discussion
- At least three “master-examples” of the writing skill, with not only a context for each example but also an explanation of how it exemplifies that skill
- A short but illuminating discussion of the skill
- A practice that enables the student, in a stimulating way, to begin to incorporate the skill into his or her own prose style; where appropriate, the exercise is followed, at the back of the book, by suggested responses
- An essay, with a prompt question adaptable to an individual class’s reading assignments, which further develops the student’s use of the writing skill; where appropriate, the essay is preceded by a pre-writing exercise

At the back of the book, in addition to the “Suggested Responses,” you will find “Further Activities,” which build on the skills demonstrated in the lessons.

Each book in the Master Classes series has been written to complement the curriculum of an approximate grade-level. Likewise, the writing skills discussion becomes progressively more sophisticated as the series advances.

- The Apprentice Level focuses on titles commonly read by high school freshmen.
- The Journeyman Level focuses on titles commonly read by high school sophomores.
- The Craftsman Level focuses on American Literature titles commonly read by high school juniors.
- The Master Level focuses on British Literature titles commonly read by high seniors.

The names of the levels, which stress that writing is a craft, were inspired by the “guild” system of medieval times. A young person wishing to become proficient in a craft would first have to serve an apprenticeship under a master. After grasping the rudiments of the craft, the apprentice would then spend time “on the road” as a journeyman further improving his proficiency. After establishing himself as a craftsman, the practitioner still faced the challenge of producing a “masterpiece” before the guild recognized him as an official master of the craft. The new master could then take on an apprentice of his own, ensuring that excellence in the craft would live on.
The great authors featured in these books, established masters of their craft, are now ready to “take on” new apprentices.

The term “master class” itself refers to a teaching tradition in the arts, most notably in classical music. A school will bring in a “maestro” to work with up-and-coming instrumentalists, sometimes on a one-to-one basis. These master classes focus on technique, as no one has more to teach aspiring artists about proficiency than expert practitioners. In the art of writing, the expert practitioners are the very authors whose work students read. A master like Charles Dickens or Jane Austen can “visit” the classroom at any time.

Enjoy hosting your own Master Classes.
Lesson One—Purpose

Definition: A writer’s sure sense of what he or she is trying to achieve in an essay or other literary form.

Example 1: In the history of British literature, few—if any—writers have had such an ironclad sense of purpose as 17th–century poet John Milton. Working in a time of great political and religious upheaval, Milton was a man of convictions who saw himself as “God’s English poet.” Intellectually precocious, he developed a profound knowledge of Greek and Latin, learning he would draw upon to create his masterpiece, Paradise Lost, which gave the English language an epic poem in the mold of ancient writers such as Homer and Virgil.

Though deeply Christian in terms of its content and vision, Paradise Lost follows the conventions of the classical epic, no more so than at the very beginning; there Milton announces the poem’s grand subject matter and invokes the aid of a higher power to help him create this monumental work:

Of Man’s first disobedience, and the fruit
Of that forbidden tree whose mortal taste
Brought death into the World, and all our woe,
With loss of Eden, till one greater Man
Restore us, and regain the blissful seat,
Sing, Heavenly Muse … what in me is dark
Illumine, what is low raise and support;
That, to the height of this great argument,
I may assert Eternal Providence,
And justify the ways of God to men.

Milton certainly is a man with a mission: to explain, by means of an epic story (“Man’s first disobedience” and its consequences), God’s overarching plan for mankind (“Eternal Providence”); an ambitious task, even for a genius; no wonder Milton calls upon the “Heavenly Muse” for inspiration.

Hopefully, Milton can be a source of inspiration for you. While not even the most demanding high school writing assignment is likely to be as daunting as writing an epic poem, as a writer you have more in common with Milton than you might imagine. Like Milton, you have to clarify—in your own mind, at least—your writing purpose in a given writing situation, though that purpose might not be as lofty as “justify[ing] the ways of God to men.” Often, your writing task will involve the creation of an “argument.” In the context of these arguments, you will have to “justify” thesis statements and other assertions.
The opening of *Paradise Lost* shows us that focusing on one’s writing purpose is a serious business—indeed, it should be the first order of business at the beginning of any writing process.

**Example 2:** *At the beginning of Henry V, one of his most famous history plays, William Shakespeare—or at least his mouthpiece, the Chorus—also prays for divine inspiration:*

O for a Muse of fire, that would ascend  
The brightest heaven of invention,  
A kingdom for a stage, princes to act  
And monarchs to behold the swelling scene!  
Then should the warlike Harry, like himself,  
Assume the port of Mars; and at his heels,  
Leash’d in like hounds, should famine, sword and fire  
Crouch for employment. But pardon, gentles all,  
The flat unraised spirits that have dared  
On this unworthy scaffold to bring forth  
So great an object: can this cockpit hold  
The vasty fields of France? Or may we cram  
Within this wooden O the very casques  
That did affright the air at Agincourt?  
O, pardon! since a crooked figure may  
Attest in little place a million;  
And let us, ciphers to this great account,  
On your imaginary forces work.  

Like Milton, Shakespeare has an arduous task ahead of him: to represent upon the small stage (“this unworthy scaffold”) of his Globe Theatre (“this wooden O”) a significant chapter in English history (“this great account”): King Henry’s 1415 invasion of France, one of the key events in the medieval Hundred Years’ War between the two kingdoms, which culminated in the battle of Agincourt, a major English victory.

Crucial to the success of the playwright’s aim is his awareness that he has an audience, the “gentles” watching the drama unfold. Just as “the warlike Harry” commands military forces, the audience members have their “imaginary forces”—in other words, the power of their imaginations. Through a collaborative effort between the acting company (which Shakespeare modestly calls “flat unraised spirits”) and the audience, an imaginary France can be created. (Shakespeare’s scintillating language, of course, is a huge help.)

Speaking through the Chorus, Shakespeare reminds us that you cannot have a fully developed writing purpose without an awareness of your audience; to know what you should write you must know for whom you are writing.
It is not sufficient, for example, to consider that your purpose is to write a persuasive essay arguing that upcoming student council elections should be postponed; you also need to consider whom you are trying to persuade. Knowing that your audience is not the school administration but the student body will influence the tone and, quite probably, the content of your essay.

Example 3: Charles Dickens had many great novels to be proud of, but, as he once admitted in print, he did have a “favourite child”: David Copperfield. What Dickens did not admit to in print (though he did write a revealing letter to his friend and future biographer John Forster on the matter) was the source of this affection: David Copperfield was his most personal book; David’s story reflects some of his own early struggles and his burning youthful ambition to be a person of consequence. This theme of self-development features in the novel’s famous opening sentence:

“Whether I shall turn out to be the hero of my own life, or whether that station will be held by anybody else, these pages must show.”

Note both the drive and clarity of Dickens’s writing purpose: “these pages must show.” Those words could act as a motto for virtually every writing assignment: every writer must know what, in any given writing situation, his or her pages “must show.”

That is not to say that assertions like “the following pages must show that Shakespeare’s sonnets are superior to Milton’s” or “in this essay I will demonstrate that our school’s art program deserves greater funding” should appear in your essays—at least, not in the final drafts. Such statements of intent can be useful in early drafts, as they can help you fully articulate your writing purpose. However, such expressions of purpose will be redundant in your later drafts; they will be—or should be—replaced by a fully-developed thesis, the assertion of your essay’s guiding idea, of which we will talk much more in Lesson Two. In a final draft, the clarity of your writing purpose will be apparent not only in your thesis but also in the entire direction and content of the essay.

All of the above commentary may cause you to ask, Yes, but how do I determine my writing purpose?

Good question. The thing to realize is that writing never happens in a vacuum; all writing has a context, a situation, from which you can derive signals and clues that can help you resolve your writing purpose.
Think of it this way: all writing projects—from a grocery list to an epic poem—are assignments, and the nature of the assignment gives you your writing purpose. Sometimes these assignments are implicit. When we sit down to write out a grocery list we understand, without really having to think about it, that our assignment is to determine the things we need to buy at the store and that our writing purpose, therefore, is to make a complete list of those items. Likewise, when we sit down and write a diary entry, we know intuitively that our writing purpose is to record and reflect upon the events of the day. These types of writing tasks one could call self-assignments.

In class, writing assignments are explicit: you receive instructions from your instructor or you read an essay question or prompt. In theory, this should make determining your writing purpose straightforward, but in practice students frequently fail to convert the assignment information into the proper writing purpose.

How does this happen? There are two major reasons: either …

a) students do not read instructions carefully enough. For example, a student is excited to see an essay question on a test about imagery in Milton. Having done an in-depth study of the imagery in Milton’s sonnets, the student starts to scribble away about that topic, ignoring the instruction in the essay prompt to focus on *Paradise Lost*;

or …

b) students write not the essay they have been asked to write but the essay they want to write. Modifying the example above just a little, we can well imagine that student reading the essay prompt about Milton on the test and determining that he will write about the sonnets anyway, hoping to impress his instructor so much that she will forgive the inconvenient fact that this splendid essay is the answer to a different question.

Most instructors will not be so forgiving, for they have reasons for asking the questions they do in the first place. An essay that is meant to be about Milton’s use of imagery in *Paradise Lost* but says nothing about *Paradise Lost* is not deserving of much credit, if any.

Determining your writing purpose in response to an assignment is like determining the right direction to travel. Imagine a car race between Paris and Berlin. A racing car that speeds off in the direction of Madrid (because the driver prefers the weather there) is not going to win a prize, even if the sun-loving driver goes twice as fast as the Berlin-bound cars.

Nor are you going to win any prizes for an essay based on the wrong writing purpose.
Practice:

In determining your writing purpose in response to a particular assignment, you must pay particularly close attention to the verb or verbs used in the instructions. A change of verb can change the nature of the whole assignment. For example, consider the difference between the following two prompts:

a) Analyze America’s “War on Drugs” over the last thirty-five years.

b) Reflect on America’s “War on Drugs” over the last thirty-five years.

Though the subject of both assignments is the same—America’s “War on Drugs”—the writing purpose of each essay will be quite different: the purpose of the first essay will be to offer an impersonal, critical understanding of the subject; the purpose of the second will be to offer a personal response to the subject. Likewise, a single verb can make the difference between a persuasive or expository approach to the same topic.
In the following exercise, match each writing assignment with a quotation from a paper by a student who has correctly understood the writing purpose entailed by that assignment. *Remember that small differences in wording can have a dramatic impact on writing purpose.* As an example, the first match has been made for you. Use each letter once and once only. Be prepared to defend your choices in class.

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<th>Assignment</th>
<th>Match</th>
<th>Quotation</th>
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<td>1. Trace the development of Charles Dickens’s capabilities as a novelist.</td>
<td>B</td>
<td>A. “Pip, the flawed hero of <em>Great Expectations</em>, is one of the most psychologically subtle characters in British fiction.”</td>
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<td>2. Select your own favorite Dickens novel, enthusiastically explaining your preference.</td>
<td>B</td>
<td>B. “From <em>David Copperfield</em> onward, Dickens pays a lot more attention to the construction of his plots.”</td>
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<td>3. “Dickens excels at describing the surfaces of human beings, but has little talent in plumbing their depths.” Defend, challenge, or qualify this opinion.</td>
<td>C</td>
<td>C. “<em>David Copperfield</em> is not only Dickens’s ‘favourite child’ but, from among his ‘brood,’” my own.”</td>
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<td>4. Explain how, in <em>Great Expectations</em>, Pip comes to a more mature understanding of what it means to be a “gentleman.”</td>
<td>D</td>
<td>D. “Reading <em>Bleak House</em>, I sometimes imagine that Dickens is not so much describing the weather of London but the ‘weather’ of his soul.”</td>
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<td>5. Account for the increasingly dark mood of the novels Dickens wrote in the 1850s.</td>
<td>E</td>
<td>E. “Faced with such pervasive social ills, Dickens had little inclination to take nostalgic trips back to the ‘good old days.’”</td>
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<td>6. Give your personal reaction to Dickens’s “gloomy” novels of the 1850s.</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>F. “Pip comes to realize that Joe Gargery, despite his lack of manners and education, is as fine a human being as he could hope to meet.”</td>
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Suggested Responses—Lesson Three

Statement #1: “Students derive an immeasurable benefit from studying Shakespeare.”

Thesis: Shakespeare’s language has enriched my understanding of English.

Antithesis: I find Shakespeare’s language to be frustratingly difficult.

Synthesis: Though sometimes challenging, Shakespeare’s language has enriched my understanding of English.

Statement #2: “Athletics dominate the life of the typical high school today.”

Thesis: For a sports enthusiast like me, Harrison High School is a wonderfully exciting environment.

Antithesis: Over the past three years, I have not received enough recognition for my academic achievements from the school community.

Synthesis: Over the past three years, the athlete in me has been very much at home at Harrison High School, but the scholar in me has not.

Statement #3: “Nothing effective has been done to alert teenagers about the dangers of alcohol consumption.”

Thesis: At my high school, the PTA’s “Alcohol Awareness Campaign” has been a failure.

Antithesis: At my high school, leading members of the PTA have put lots of time, money, and energy into the “Alcohol Awareness Campaign.”

Synthesis: Well intentioned as it is, our PTA’s “Alcohol Awareness Campaign” needs student input to become truly effective.

Statement #4: “Modern teaching methods stress the meaning of poetry to the total exclusion of considerations of beauty and pleasure.”

Thesis: The manner in which some teachers “decode” poetry kills the joy of reading it.

Antithesis: Last year I had a teacher who mesmerized the class by declaiming classic poems.

Synthesis: In my experience, a teacher can combine an analytical approach to poetry with an infectious enthusiasm for the art.
Activity 4

One of the great traditions in British literature, from the sixteenth to the twenty-first century, is essay writing. Among the great exponents of the essay are

- Joseph Addison
- Francis Bacon
- Thomas de Quincey
- G. K. Chesterton
- E. M. Forster
- William Hazlitt
- Charles Lamb
- George Orwell
- Richard Steele
- Virginia Woolf

Essays by these writers are widely available in collections, anthologies, textbooks, and online. Select an essay by one of these writers (or another essayist approved by your teacher) and identify at least four of the writing and critical skills discussed in the lessons. Use the worksheet provided to record your findings.
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*(Lesson numbers are in parentheses)*

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STUDENT OBJECTIVES

The following objectives are addressed throughout this book, and many of them are touched on in every lesson. The list of objectives in the lesson-by-lesson correlations, therefore, is not exhaustive; rather, the objectives that are a particular focus of each individual lesson are noted.

The student will be able to:

A Use imagery and figurative language to enhance meaning
B Use a variety of sentence structures
C Organize ideas to enhance coherence and logical progression
D Provide specific support for ideas
E Apply prewriting strategies to generate ideas
F Use effective sequence and transitions
G Revise drafts to improve organization and style
H Analyze published pieces as writing models
I Write in a voice appropriate to audience and purpose
J Use diction effectively to enhance meaning
K Apply specific criteria to evaluate writing

LESSON-BY-LESSON CORRELATIONS

Lesson One—Purpose
Skill Analysis H
Practice C, D
Essay H, K

Lesson Two—Thesis
Skill Analysis H
Practice D, K
Essay C, E, I

Lesson Three—Balance
Skill Analysis H
Practice C, I, J
Essay B, C, D, F

Lesson Four—Argument Development
Skill Analysis H
Practice D, H, K
Essay C, I