

# Form and Artistry: The Reading/Writing Connection

*“One of the best ways of helping students to gain this appreciation of literary form and artistry is to encourage them to engage in such imaginative writing.”*

—*Literature as Exploration*, 1938/1983, p. 48

**M**y first book report earned a lowly C. Okay, so I put the whole thing off until the night before and wrote it with scoldings from my mother and my own tears of frustration.

But that grade, coupled with the unpleasant writing experience, is all I remember. I have no recollection of the book. I had already decided that school reading was tedious and meaningless. And since book reports were the only writing I usually did in school, I found that tedious, too.

By the time I was in middle school, I learned that it was easier to make up a book and write a fake book report than to read something the teacher told us to read and follow a formula for writing the report. The books I liked to read were never on the approved list anyway. In my room late at night, I played with poetry and dense descriptions of magical places. I wrote lengthy romantic stories based on characters in the novels I was reading. I tinkered with flashbacks and symbolism. I toyed with voice.

If the whole idea behind English language arts classes is to foster a love of reading and a thirst for human experience and ideas represented through text, then we have to think critically about not only the kinds of reading our students do, but also the kinds of writing they do. Tom Romano, in *Writing with Passion: Life Stories, Multiple Genres* (1995), stresses that what matters in our classrooms is the “subjective experiences students achieve with read-

ing and writing” (p. 195). That subjective experience can be celebrated through writing. Creative writing. I remember a high school teacher dismissing writing workshop because students did too much “creative writing.” She focused on literary criticism essays written to a formula. Serious writing. Correct writing.

If our writing instruction is reduced to *how* to write a formulaic essay with no “mistakes,” then we will have failed to show students how writing—like reading—is a transaction between the reader and the text. But if we open up the possibilities for student responses to literature by allowing them to create literature themselves, we will be far more likely to engage them in the literature of others. If we want them to appreciate the form and artistry of literature, then they must be allowed to live that experience, not only as readers, but as writers.

We expect students to appreciate literature, yet we trivialize the role that their own writing plays in that appreciation process. Students can read literature, but they can’t *create* it. Such a stance ultimately disrespects students, their culture, their stories, and their development as human beings.

How wonderful it would be if our students could add to the body of literature in a classroom through their own stories and poems. How wonderful if we could extend to students Louise Rosenblatt’s first principle for finding human satisfaction in reading—the freedom to respond to text in their own way, even if that way involves “creative writing.”