The young often feel lonely and lost.
Good teaching helps them to feel
They are part of the larger world.

— Gilbert Hightet

College freshmen face major adjustments: new school, different schedules, new courses, a variety of teachers, new classmates, and especially a new position. In high school they were at the top: starring in the school paper, the student council, the athletics programs, the school plays. In college they are often lost and lonely, the youngest on the campus, unsure of themselves and their abilities, sometimes unable to find the classroom, the cafeteria, or security.

This is the time when we get them for the first college English courses Composition, Communication Arts, English 1, or whatever it is currently called. The challenge for the teacher is to teach not only writing, but also the art, the craft, the discipline of critical thinking. No longer is it enough to acquire a large vocabulary; words must be used accurately and with sharp focus. No longer is it enough to string sentences together into paragraphs with topic sentences; these must grow and flow into each other to make a beginning, a middle and an end. Certainly it is not enough to produce three paragraphs on an assigned topic; they must introduce, develop, and analyze the topic, and have something significant to say about it.
Pre-writing

What to Write About. One starts with the writing, and the most important question is: What can college freshmen write about with some sureness and authority? The teacher must make them feel able to write, even eager to write. Obviously this cannot be done by choosing topics out of the blue ("A Glass of Water"; "A Chair") or out of a book ("The Russian Market," after reading Chekhov; "Vengeance," after reading Edgar Allan Poe). The student must be led towards writing through a process of questioning and discovery.

Pre-writing. Of the three stages in writing

Pre-writing
Writing and
Post-writing,

the first is the most vital.

Where do young writers find writing material? From their lives and experiences, of course, limited though these be. From their selves and what they fell, like/dislike, remember, hope. From the experiences they have encountered (Have they been to market on errands? Have they watched cockfights with their fathers? Have they worked in the fields during school vacations, in the kitchen on weekends?); from the places in which they have lived (What is a hometown like? What are town fiestas like? What is the difference between swimming in a river and in the sea?) These constitute the innermost of concentric circles of experience: the self.

The next circle consists of family and friends: all the people they have met, and who have influenced them: mother, father, memorable teacher, ninong, ninang, favorite or least favorite cousins, lolo, lola, aunt, uncle, neighbor, parish priest, playmates, classmates. Spending time talking about these in class, sharing experiences, may at first seem as difficult as pulling teeth, but this is the basis of writing, and some great writers have gone through full professional lives mining the experiences of childhood and growing up (e.g., Truman Capote writing about the south; William Faulkner about his Yoknapatawpha County, Bienvenido Santos about the Tondo of his childhood).
The first composition could therefore be about the self that emerges from all this reflection and discussion, or about places and people significant to childhood and growing up. Sometimes I ask the class to write introductions of themselves — anything but “I was born on...” I have received self-intros in the form of interviews, eulogies, metaphors (“I am a dull, useful pencil rather than a bright Pentel pen”), feature stories, biographical sketches. The result is not only that the writer discovers facets of self important enough to write about (thus making a critical choice), but that the members of the class start a bonding process, begin to know each other and feel less lost and lonely. They have started to reflect on and examine their lives critically, which they must in order to grow, for “the unexamined life is not worth living.”

As the semester progresses, therefore, the pre-writing sessions, which one can call variously “research,” or “sending reporters out on assignments,” or “brain-storming,” can take different forms.

If the class discusses a short story, writing can come out of this. A story like Nick Joaquin’s “May Day Eve,” for example, could result in a trip to and an essay about Intramuros — or about one’s hometown, the district in which one lives, old houses, summer orchards, folk beliefs about predicting one’s spouse, falling in love.

If the class is given an essay to read, for example, Carmen Guerrero Nakpil’s “Bahala Na,” the discussion could lead to compositions on various Philippine values — pakikisama, utang na loob, pakikipag-kapwa tao (with specific examples) — or on expressions that have special meaning to the young Filipino: plastic, weird, M.U. (mutual understanding), ahas, hataw, heavy, freak, etc.

The class could also be given specific assignments that leave the circles of self and family, and explore possible writing topics in the community: how do Filipinos package food (e.g., suman, tamales); from what provinces do one’s neighbors originate? I have been very happy with the results of sending the students out to do interviews. We plan as a class what kind of people to interview: Workers with different occupations? Food vendors of different products? People who work at night? A coordinator lists down each one’s choices to avoid duplications. The teacher gives pointers on the craft of interviewing, and they set out.

The students are instructed to bring back the interviews written down in the most appropriate form: as a narrative, a description, a
question-answer piece, a feature story, a transcribed dialogue, etc. These are discussed in class, and questions are asked/answered about occupations, livelihood, attitudes towards work, values held, even about the Philippine economy. Sometimes I have undertaken to weave as many of them as possible into a feature story, and sent it to the national newspapers, where they have been published.

These explorations into the community could take many different forms. If the school is in the provinces, there is a whole regional culture to discover. Students could go out to talk to their grandparents or the older members of the community to ask questions about the past: how were pigs butchered in the old days? How was sugar made? How was liquor (basi, tuba, lambanog, tapuy) made? What were the fishing or planting methods and rituals? How are barangay officials chosen?

All the above is pre-writing, for the purpose of having the students discover what they can write about, think critically about it, and make choices. Some students have unexpected, unpredictable expertise: car repair, cockfighting, cooking. Some have telling experiences: the first peso I earned, the first funeral I witnessed, the birth of a baby brother. When they find something to write about, the triumph is doubled by the insight into self and culture.

Writing

The act of writing has been compared to the “moment of truth” in a bullfight, in which the bullfighter faces the angry bull with only a short sword covered with a short red cape. Gone are the picadores, banderillas, horses, and assistant bullfighters. Now he is alone and he must plunge the sword into the precise spot where it can reach the heart; he must kill or risk being killed. No one else can help him.

The student, the paper and the ballpen, or the student and the flickering computer screen, are at the moment of truth. The writing must be done. Some postpone it by rituals — taking a bath, eating, calling a friend, listening to the radio, watching “just one TV program.” Some postpone it again and again till they have to write in the teeth of the deadline. I assure students that delaying tactics are human and logical, and even professional writers have them (Balzac put on a black cape; Schiller had to have rotten apples on his desk). But from the rituals they just have to go on and write.
"Write in white heat," I tell them: forget about grammar at first, or beautiful handwriting, or even spelling. Just write all you know about the subject. If you can't quite begin, start with a dummy first sentence: "This composition is about . . ." — you can change it later. Or "free-write" — write down anything about the subject that comes to mind, in any order, and fix it later.

Make an outline, if that would help you, or a summary. Draw up a question or a list of questions you hope to answer. Read similar essays to inspire you. Eventually, however, face the moment of truth, and write.

Post-writing

This is the time to "revise in cold blood" what has been written in white heat. Correct grammar, diction, and spelling. Rearrange parts of the sentence for clarity; rearrange sentences within the paragraph for better flow. Put in more exact words, add examples, be more specific. Cut out what is unnecessary, excessive, superfluous, even though the phrase seemed great when you wrote it. Don't use a phrase when you can use a word; don't use a clause when you can use a phrase; don't use a sentence when you can use a clause. Don't use an adjective when you can use a better noun (that describes as well as names) or a stronger verb.

Only you, I remind the students, know what it is that you want to say; lead you readers to it. Leave time for post-writing (re-writing, editing) because it is as important as pre-writing (which probably takes the longest time) and writing (which is the hardest task). Do not hand in anything you have nor reconsidered, revised, improved.

Marking the Composition

This is the teacher's part of Post-Writing: reading the written pieces, making marks on them, and giving feedback. I prefer the work "marking" to "correcting," because the latter assumes that only the teacher knows best and must correct the (mistakenly) written piece. The teacher knows best about the mechanics; the student knows best about the topic he/she chose.
I therefore mark; in effect I edit the piece to become as good as it can be, while still retaining the writer’s voice. I correct the basic errors of grammar and diction to which Filipinos are prone:

Verb tenses — there is a special difficulty with past perfect, which is not in any of our languages
Agreement of subject and verb, noun and pronoun, etc.
Prepositions
Subjunctive mood, etc.

If the class has low ability in this area, one might choose not to correct all errors all the time (leaving the paper a mass of red marks), but perhaps one at a time. A week devoted to just agreement (or just tenses, or just prepositions) might result in a better understanding of language usage. Also, it leaves the student with some sense of success and not utter defeat. Even when I have taught superior classes whose grammar does not need much help, sometimes there still are endemic errors (class errors) like not knowing the difference between its and it’s. I have declared “sudden death” solutions: F to anybody who makes that error again after it has been explained and discussed.

It is important, of course, to return the marked compositions promptly, and to give feedback. Feedback on the paper itself consists of comments, even just a Good! Very good! Could be even better if . . . , Wow! Okay!, and of course a grade. Feedback to the class about the batch of compositions, or about particular success in the batch, leads them to critical understanding and evaluation of their own writing.

I have used the students’ own compositions as models to teach them. After the pieces have been edited (by me), I type out a few chosen ones, mimeograph or photocopy them, and distribute them for a workshop discussion. The class reads them ahead, and we discuss their content, their styles, the questions we would like to ask the authors, how good they are and how might they be improved. The class must speak first and the teacher last, so that they are not influenced or repressed by authority. I try to see to it that each one has a chance to be “published” before the term ends. This encourages writing even more than reading models by professional writers, because “If Classmate Y can do it, so can I.” One class was so proud of their collective work that they collected the best pieces in a kind of yearbook, in which I was also assigned to write a piece. Now that they are teachers,
chairpersons, executives, this class still gets together, takes along their yearbooks, and spends time remembering the Freshman English class in which they became friends.

Writing therefore, and this includes the highest degree of creative writing that the students can manage, is taught by going stage by stage:

Pre-writing: motivation, exploration, discovering what to write about;
Writing: the moment of truth
Post-writing by the student - revising, correcting, improving, and by the teacher-marking, making comments, leading the discussion and evaluation of the work, its worth, and ways to improve it.

**Critical Thinking**

This, one will note from the above, underlies the whole writing process, and every step of the course. It began in the discussion of experiences and reflections worth writing about — in effect, in critical consideration of the student’s first three circles of experiences: the self, family and friends, neighbors and communities. Critical thinking means looking at experience, seeing it as significant, seeing it as Filipino, as part of regional or national culture, even seeing it as part of development. Critical thinking runs through all discussions of the writing process, through all post-writing evaluation of the work produced by the class. It can, and should, become a habit of mind.

It is done by *interrogation*. No subject maybe talked about uncritically. Always, teacher and students must ask: *Why* did that happen? Why is it important or unimportant? Why is that an error? Why did that composition work so well?

Also: *How* was it done? How did people in the old days manage their lives? How can one find out how people feel? How did parent, neighbor, brother, friend react to an event?

And more: *Who* are these people — mother, *ninong, lola*, vendor? What is the essence of their humanity, their feelings? Who matters to me, to them?

And specially, *So what?* If this corn vendor does not want his children to follow in his footsteps, what does that mean? If classmate A considers rock music the special, particular beat of his generation,
what does that imply? If, after research (say the first research or term paper), Classmate B concludes that Bonifacio was greater than Rizal, what now. If people say that Filipinos are great imitators, what does it mean?

The habit of critical thinking is developed slowly, constantly, by always asking questions, making the asking of questions a habit of mind. Sometimes the answers to the questions are not readily available; the students must realize that what is important is to ask; the answers will come. A good story to illustrate this is "The Last Question," Isaac Asimov's personal favorite among all his hundreds of pieces of science fiction. The characters ask the same, the ultimate question, and the answer comes only at the very end.

My belief and contention, therefore, is that in the act of teaching writing, eventually one must be teaching critical thinking. The important question of what to write about, how to treat it, how to present it, is a critical decision. The mechanics — grammar, diction, usage, sentence structure — are learned in order to present this critical choice in the clearest, most effective way. The force of what the student wants to say will make the mechanics easier to learn. After the piece is written, more critical thinking is required to evaluate and further improve the written piece, the writing skills.

This constitutes energetic, day-to-day, point-by-point, student-by-student teaching. Questions are asked and answered; individuals are led to their own discoveries; shy students are coaxed to speak, the outgoing are taught control; self-worth is taught through self-evaluation, through small successes. It must be a constant, active, interested, even enthusiastic interaction, with the classroom as a forum for development and triumph. For the student, the development is into a better writer and a thinking person. For the teacher, the triumph lies in having achieved good teaching and brought the lost and lonely into the larger — thinking, feeling, achieving — world.