

# Coaching Techniques for Working with Writers

The coaching technique was described by Carole Rich of KU's William Allen White School of Journalism and Mass Communications as a way for editors to confer with reporters regarding their stories. The techniques central to coaching, however, can also be adapted to conferring with students about their writing assignments.

Coaching strategies call upon editors/teachers to **maintain a distinction between fixing a finished product and coaching a writer**. The keys to coaching include listening and praising. The following strategies are central to coaching writers:

**Listen:** Rather than telling the writer what is wrong with the paper, establish a collaborative tone for the conference, asking the writer questions about strengths and weaknesses. Through questioning and listening, help the writer to discover strengths and problems. Central questions to ask include: What do you think you need help with today? Where are you struggling? What works? What needs work?

**Laud:** Before discussing the negative, consider the positive aspects of the writing; find something to praise.

**Limit:** Work on only a few goals at a time, rather than trying to fix all of the writer's problems in a single session. Suggest specific remedies. If the student needs more than time allows, recommend that he/she makes a follow-up appointment.

**Reinforce:** Provide feedback to the writer, praising signs of progress and noting recurring weaknesses that are related to the goals established for the writer and for the session.

**Reassure:** Make your support of the writer clear at all times.

**Reward:** Reward a writer who has reached goals, either fully or partially. Possible rewards include comments noted on a draft or special recognition of the student or of the paper, depending upon what is appropriate for the situation.

Rich discussed how coaching may be used during the entire process of producing a news story. The process she discussed could be adapted to other kinds of writing as well, and to the relationship between student and teacher as that process proceeds.

1. Before the paper has been started: Discuss the idea with the writer, asking the writer questions and discussing various viewpoints or angles that the writer may take with the idea. Do not dictate ideas to the writer; rather, ask the writer for ideas.

2. Before the paper has been written, or when initial drafting has begun: Ask about the main focus of the paper, and provide praise for a good idea, as well as encouragement to proceed with the drafting.

At this point, if the writer is having difficulty figuring out a focus, these questions may help:

- What struck you about this topic?
- What do you think is the most important idea?
- What do you want the reader to know?
- Are there any possibly interesting angles that can be emphasized?

To get the writer to consider organizational options, ask her what organizational approach she is considering.

3. While the writer is working on a paper: If the writer is having difficulty, try to ask questions that will encourage him to find his own answers. If the writer cannot come up with his own answers, listen and make suggestions based upon the responses elicited by the questions you ask.

Coaching questions to ask during this phase:

- What works? What doesn't work?
  - What are you trying to say here?
  - Where do you want to go with this paper?
  - What questions do you think a reader might have at this point?
4. During the editing process: If the paper or article is to be edited for publication, work with the writer during the editing phase. If you ask for particular editing changes, have the writer make the changes to the copy or draft. If you ask for changes, explain why they are necessary, and make sure to praise strengths as you edit. If there are recurring errors, point them out to the writer, but do not attempt to tackle numerous writing problems during this phase.
  5. After the paper has been completed: Provide written feedback to the writer, and, if possible, also talk with the writer about what you liked. Try to offer specific comments about techniques that worked well, reinforcing for the writer the desirability of using that technique in the future. If a recurrent problem persisted in the final version of the paper, mention that to the writer and make suggestions for ways to avoid it next time.

### *References:*

Don Fry and Peter Clark, the Poynter Institute, St. Petersburg, Florida.

Carole Rich, William Allen White School of Journalism and Mass Communications, University of Kansas.

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