



Writing: A Tool for Teaching Confirmation

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When I think of confirmation planning I remember an exchange I once had with a fellow pastor. “What material are you using?” I asked. “It depends on which year you ask me!” he responded.

How true that is. As we who regularly try to improve our methods and effectiveness at communicating the gospel to young people, evaluating and modifying our approach and materials is probably the rule rather than the exception. As we change parishes, we often see the need to adapt our approach and materials to the new setting. As our own lives change, old methods may not fit as well any more.

In this article we attempt to explain one method of teaching that other confirmation instructors might find helpful. It has been used with two different curricula in over half of the class sessions. The method is adaptable and effective in helping confirmands process and own their Christian faith.

I. RECENT RESEARCH IN THE WRITING PROCESS

Current research and methodology in the teaching of writing can shed light on the teaching of confirmation.¹ We suggest at least four applications to confirmation instruction.

1. Writing can be defined in one way as thinking on paper. The process of writing helps writers to organize their thoughts. A primary purpose of confirmation instruction is to enable children to take ownership of the baptismal promises made for them. Regular writing on different aspects of the faith is an effective way of enabling such ownership.

¹The theory came from a class in teaching writing that the co-author, Nancy, took in 1987 at the University of Minnesota–Duluth.

2. Research indicates that in order to learn to think in a discipline one must *write* in that discipline. For example, students who write frequently in science class become better scientific thinkers, able to handle more complex thought and reading material as they progress. Or, students who write their own mathematical story problems learn the mathematical thinking that goes into the construction of these problems. Similarly, if we want our children to think theologically they must be given the regular opportunity to write theologically.

3. Students are hungry for audiences to listen to their thoughts. Unfortunately, much writing in schools focuses on stylistic concerns. This sometimes intimidates the full expression of the student’s thoughts. The confirmation teacher is in a unique position, where content is the primary issue (although style may be considered in special cases; see below). This is a significant

opportunity for ministry.

4. The best readers and writers see these activities as being primarily social. We all know the joy of finding someone with similar thoughts or who enjoys the same kinds of books. People who dislike reading and writing view them as solitary acts to be labored over. Therefore confirmation instruction must introduce the idea that discussing faith and theology is rewarding and a *community* issue. Faith is not only something between the believer and God but something that can and should be shared with others.

II. A NEW LOOK AT WRITING

“But I’ve already tried writing with my kids and it didn’t work,” remarked one pastor we’ve talked with. “I gave them a question something like ‘Would you baptize your child and why?’ and I was really disappointed with the shallowness of their thoughts. I’m nervous about trying writing.” He raises an excellent question. Perhaps we need to view writing differently before a writing approach is tried in confirmation instruction.

Learning to write is much like the acquisition of any skill. When a baby begins to speak, the first sounds and words are all approximations. Children who are encouraged and allowed to practice with more mature speakers will slowly acquire attuned ears, more vocabulary, and more complex ways of expression. We do not worry that the immature attempts of pre-school children will be permanent deficiencies; we know they will master speech if they practice.

Similarly, writing is a skill which takes years of practice. None of us writes the same way we did as adolescents. Our abilities to think abstractly, to hear nuances, and to express thought with specialized vocabulary have all been considerably sharpened over the years.

We need to view confirmation students’ writing as the “rehearsals” of children with curious minds trying out new ideas—not as finished “performances.” We can judge student writing not on a deficit model (what’s not there)—but on a building block model (what’s there that is good to build on). We can see students’ attempts with a sense of humor, taking hope that continued practice with a more mature Christian will enable more sophisticated thinking.

III. ORGANIZING THE CLASS

With this theoretical foundation, let’s consider what shape a class might take. It should be emphasized that this is not a new curriculum but a student-centered

writing approach to any curriculum. As with any process, teachers will find that it takes time to arrive at a personal style. While not every teacher will feel equally comfortable with each idea, the following thoughts are offered to get teachers started. An interchangeable, three-pronged approach forms the foundation for the class:

	60 MINUTE CLASS	90 MINUTE CLASS
Attendance/business	5 minutes	5-10 minutes
A. LESSON	15-20	15-30
B. WRITING	5-10	5-10
C. SHARING (in pairs, in small groups,		

or in whole class)	5-15	5-15
Break		10
Rewriting, questions, memory work, etc.	5-10	10
Summarizing, new business, etc.	5	10

A. The Lesson

During this time the teacher presents one or two main ideas for the day’s lesson. This is where the Bible story, text, or handout is dealt with. It is not necessary to present all the intricacies of the topic. In planning the teacher asks, “What is crucial for an adolescent to know to be literate in the faith?” With any curriculum the teacher should be selective about what is used in class. The frequent use of outside A-V resources, games, stories, and other helps can augment the lesson.

This need not mean a lowering of standards; instead, the opposite can be true. The total content may be less than that prescribed by a set curriculum, but the amount of application and personalization is greater. Students must integrate, evaluate, and analyze in order to write. These are higher-order thinking skills not usually engaged by fill-in-the blank questions or multiple-choice tests.

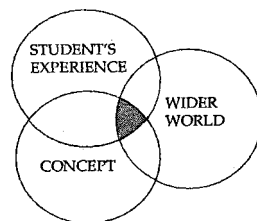
B. Writing

In this section the students respond to the lesson by making direct application to their own situation. Handouts can be helpful for this. (Sometimes I ask students to write as part of an introduction before the lesson. In this way I can tie a previous lesson into the current one.)

During this time, the teacher might do his or her own writing to share with the students. This vulnerability can be helpful—it keeps the teacher humble as well as opening up the pupils. Walking around the room and monitoring the students’ progress is also valuable. They often need assistance in getting their thoughts flowing.

Here are some guidelines for creating appropriate questions and writing assignments:

1. Because many junior high students are just beginning to think abstractly, questions should start with personal experience and move toward abstraction.
2. The more complex the theological concept, the more personal the question should be—or the later in the confirmation program it should be presented.
3. The most successful questions involve the lesson (concept being taught), the student’s experience, and the wider world. In the following diagram the shaded area marks the objective on which the question should focus.



4. Whenever the instructor can provide the students with a projected audience, a suggested writing style, and a purpose for the writing, the students will have more “scaffolding” upon which to build a response. (This was the problem with the pastor’s question about baptism cited above. He gave the students no scaffolding to use in constructing their response.) Here are some examples:

Sacraments

Good:

Our congregation will discuss the topic of giving communion to people of all ages. After studying the Lutheran understanding of the sacraments—especially the Lord’s Supper—do you think our church should or should not commune little children? (*purpose*). In a proposal (*style*) to the church council (*audience*) (a) state your position and (b) support your answer using your understanding of the sacraments.

Poor:

What is the Lutheran understanding of the Lord’s Supper?

Bible Stories

Good:

Pretend you are Jesus in the Garden of Gethsemane. In at least one page, write down what prayers (*style*) he might have prayed to God (*audience*) before he was betrayed (*purpose*).

Poor:

What happened in the Garden of Gethsemane?

Creeds

Good:

The parents of a friend of yours recently attended a revival in their town and have a renewed interest in the Christian faith. They were never a church-going family before but now are searching out a place for family worship. Your friend is confused about all this and knows very little about Christianity. She sends you a letter explaining these events and her confusion. Since she

knows you are a Christian and are in confirmation instruction, she concludes her letter with the request that you explain to her some of the basics of the Christian faith.

In a letter (*style*) to her (*audience*), using language that she will understand, explain *at least* five basics of the Christian faith (*purpose*). In this letter you may wish to consider our understanding of God, Christmas, Easter, sin, forgiveness, resurrection, etc.

Poor:

Write your own creed.

Good:

Think of two occasions when you believe God was active in your life. In at least ten sentences describe these experiences to a friend (*audience*) so that he or she might understand (*style, purpose*).

Commandments

Good:

In a 1-2 page letter (*style*) to your parent(s) (*audience*) describe (a) what your parents mean to you, and (b) what actions and responsibilities are involved in “honoring your parent(s)” (*purpose*). You have the option of mailing this as a Christmas present.

Poor:

What does the Fourth Commandment mean?

Ethical Decisions

Good:

The lockers at school have been ransacked and students are asked to submit their losses for an insurance claim. Scott reports his boombox missing and receives \$100. Later he finds he had left it at a friend’s house. Scott asks you what he should do now (*purpose*). In at least ten sentences, tell him your answer (*style, audience*), giving reasons.

Poor:

Is it okay to keep something if you can get away with it?

Ideas for writing assignments can come from outside resources² and from personal experiences. Several years ago I buried three infants in six weeks. Since I also had small children at the time I found the experience especially difficult. For a lesson on the meaning of Christ’s resurrection for us, I related this experience to my students, describing each situation and how I had struggled to be a comforting pastor. I then said, “O.K. Now you are the pastor. Choose any one of these situations and write what you would say and do to comfort the families in their loss.”

The responses were wonderful. One eighth grader said he would first hug the parents and tell them how sorry he was (and then share the hope we have through Christ). Another girl raised her hand and asked if she could write about a similar situation from her own experience. These two students, as well as others, were able to connect the concept for the day, their personal experience, and the wider world.

Many English teachers ask their students to do their writing in a journal that stays in the classroom, thus preventing loss, theft, or forgotten homework. Further it is quasi-confidential; only the instructor will see it. The idea has merit both for confirmation and Sunday School instruction.

²One resource I have found helpful is the *Tension Getter* books, published by Youth Specialties, 1224 Greenfield Dr., El Cajon, CA 92021.

C. Sharing

The emphases in sharing are threefold: (1) to applaud efforts to think theologically and risk on paper; (2) to nudge students beyond Sunday School truisms; and (3) to create a classroom of trust.

To facilitate trust I have found it helpful to begin with pairs or small groups which then report back to the larger group. Sometimes they write a joint statement. Sometimes they evaluate each other's efforts, listing three strengths and one suggestion for improvement. Occasionally I'll collate their answers on the blackboard in an attempt to put together a class response (e.g., "Ways we have seen God active in our world").

Whether or not the sharing session works depends on the make-up of the class. Its success, I believe, is a function of the motivation of the group. If they are not motivated they'll likely shift gears to school, sports, and sex. Sharing has potential, but care needs to be exercised in its use. Discipline and courtesy must be strictly maintained. Community cannot be built unless there is trust, consistency, and a clear standard of behavior enforced from the beginning.

The remainder of the class can be spent rewriting, answering questions, doing memory work, or polishing a piece for publication (e.g., in a class magazine, church bulletin board, Sunday bulletin, or newsletter—in these cases I monitor style as well as content). It is important to remember that much of the real learning comes in trying again after a false start or two. If the students never get the chance to rewrite and polish, then the instructor provides only "rehearsals" and no "performance." Occasionally (and, of course, with permission) student comments can be used in sermons. This possibility might provide motivation.

IV. BETWEEN CLASSES

Between classes the teacher can write short responses to the students' work. The teacher may ask questions, gently challenge, applaud, or affirm. Because students will be writing about their own situation they will invest themselves more in their writing. This teacher-student exchange may be the greatest opportunity that pastors have for ministry with some youth. It is potentially much more valuable to the students than all the particulars of some curriculum. Taking this one step further, teachers may ask students to respond, disagree, or clarify their answers according to the teacher's comments. This is best done in a journal format at the beginning of class.

Here are two samples of student writing and teacher responses.

SITUATION: A friend of yours has cancer. He/she doesn't know whether she/he will live or die. But your friend is scared. One evening your friend comes to you for help and comfort. What do you say?

Student #1: "I would say, 'You can't cure your cancer, but the best thing you can do is just don't worry and just have fun. I know it's hard not to worry but you just have to try. I will be here if you want to talk about it.'"

My response: "On the one hand, very personal and supportive. You indicate a willingness to support your friend and be there for him/her. Perhaps you might ask yourself what role our Christian faith plays here. Is God present? loving? Does Christianity offer comfort when the possibility of death is faced? Also, can we turn

off the worry machine ourselves? I'm not sure. I know I don't do very well at it. Thanks for your thoughts."

Student #2: "Dear Louie, If you die you will be in a better place up there. Think of it as the beginning, not the end. It is the beginning of a new relationship with Christ."

My response: "Fine, brief summary. Christ is the key, that's for sure. Does your friend have a relationship with Christ? If not, perhaps you might want to discuss with him how Christ is the one who cares for us now and in eternity. Perhaps, as well, you might consider how Christ is with him in his illness. In the book of Hebrews Jesus says, 'I'll never leave you nor forsake you.' Read Romans 8:38-39. What does that tell us about God's love in times of trouble?"

V. OTHER ADVANTAGES OF THIS METHOD

A writing approach to confirmation instruction offers other important classroom advantages:

1. It is more easily individualized for special situations, such as students who have enrolled mid-year or who have been absent. Individualized plans are more realistic than curricula which assume perfect attendance.

2. The research shows especially dramatic improvement in writing for students of lower ability or who have language barriers. Confirmation can provide for them a much-needed opportunity to practice. But here teachers must take special care to create a trusting atmosphere; avoid forced sharing or exchanging of papers. With a focus on content rather than style, the method can and does work also for students with learning disabilities and other learning handicaps.

3. The method does not save preparation time, but it results in greater satisfaction with the final product. The emphasis here is not on preparing an entertaining lecture but on devising good writing assignments and in responding to the students' work. In fact, much of the lesson planning can be built around what the students have previously written; it can truly respond to their needs.

4. The opportunity for students to respond to each other's thoughts increases the interaction between class members.

5. For pastors/teachers who have conferences, the writing provides concrete evidence of faith development. This can be discussed with both parents and students (always being careful to protect confidentiality). The decision to confirm can be made less in terms of "knowing enough" and more in terms of individual ownership and development of faith.

The writing approach can be helpful beyond the confirmation classroom as well:

1. It helps the pastor evaluate Sunday School instruction. The students may do well with facts and memory work, but it is always enlightening to find out how they put things together.

2. It provides a tool to monitor the level of spiritual development of the congregation. Generally the students reflect what their parents and Sunday School teachers believe (although through this process we try to move the young people toward their own formulations). It's helpful for the pastor to "overhear" what's going on at home and in the parents' minds.

3. It provides a chance to take the pulse of young people's issues. The teacher can hear what even the quietest students believe but are unable to say aloud. Writing provides a window to see how sensitive and aware these often rowdy confirmands are.

Although experimental, this method has given us new directions in the demanding yet exciting task of teaching the gospel to young people.³

³The authors solicit response from readers, especially those who have used similar methods of instruction. Their address: 1100 East Superior Street, Duluth MN 55802.