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Interchapter 2A

The Art of Leaving

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Image by Jose Antonio Alba from Pixabay

About the Author

Eric wrote this piece while he was an undergraduate assistant in the former Writing Center. Now a recovering English teacher, Eric enjoys helping others answer questions, solve problems, locate information, and discover books as the Library Media Specialist at Bellingham High School. If Mr. B is not reading or coaching distance runners, he's probably running, biking, skiing, hiking, or traveling, often with his wife, Aimee, and children, Alden and Uma. The editors welcome communication about this piece through the Studio's email: rws@wwu.edu.

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In the course of my year as a Writing Center Assistant, I've been introduced to a number of helpful techniques for guiding students' writing. I have learned to read drafts with a global-to-local focus, to ask open-ended questions, and to identify patterns of error for students to focus on for editing and future writing. These techniques were all suggested to me by the directors of the Writing Center. In addition to these skills, I employ several techniques that I crafted from my own experience. The most interesting and effective technique that I have developed is a practice I call *leaving*.

A form of leaving happens in every writing session, usually the end when the student exits the session. But my kind of leaving usually occurs in mid-session. When a session develops to the stage where a visitor needs to write (a sentence or two, an introduction, a conclusion), I say, "Go ahead and work on that, and I'll be right back." I then leave the table and move to an area where I can monitor the visitor's progress until it appears that they have finished. Once visitors stop writing, I return and ask, "So what did you come up with? Would you like to read it to me?" After they read me their creations, I give them appropriate feedback.

Leaving might sound like a strange technique for guiding writing, but I've observed several reasons why it works. First, I believe leaving is effective because it removes the pressure of writing for an audience and thus creates a more natural writing environment. Who sits at home and writes while other people sit nearby and observe them? Not me. By leaving the area, I give writers the solitude that most people require for composition. Leaving is good because it allows students the space to relax and to write. Second, leaving is a productive technique because it establishes a mini deadline. When I leave the area, visitors do not know when I will be back, but they get the sense

that the period of my absence is the best time to write. The students expect me to expect them to complete their task while I am gone, and they usually do. I give them as long as they need (within reason), and when I see they have finished or are winding down, I return. Since I have not been present for the visitors' creations, they are generally willing, even eager, to share them with me. Finally, leaving is nice because it gives me a chance to stretch my legs and chat with my friendly colleagues. This brief respite enables me to return with extra vigor for the remainder of the session.

I first practiced leaving while working in an hour-long appointment with one of my regular weekly visitors. It is best to use leaving with experienced students who feel comfortable with the surroundings; for instance, I would not advise leaving toward the beginning of a first-time visitor's session. Doing so might make the visitor feel abandoned. Leaving is also best employed when visitors have time for actual work. Visitors who come in with 20 minutes to desperately revise a 10-page take home final essay may not appreciate the fine art of leaving. Leaving involves some risk, but if practiced wisely, it can be a safe and effective technique for prompting the writing process. Try it once or twice and then decide if leaving is for you. So "go ahead and think about it." Because the time has come for me to leave.