Copying Models of Good Writing

To help my English 3 students truly focus on models of good writing and begin to develop their own criteria for judging good writing, I’ve added this semester-length activity to my curriculum. It’s a low-risk, confidence- building activity at which all students can succeed.

Once a week, I choose a short sample (120 – 130 words) of what I consider **good writing**, fiction or non-fiction. Some are excerpts from classic or contemporary literature, some simply examples of clear, practical writing. I project the sample, with author and title, on the LCD or overhead projector, and ask the students to copy it carefully in their own handwriting or printing. This slow, deliberate copying requires students to slow down and focus, and the kinesthetic mind-hand connection sharpens focus and retention.

Once the students have finished copying, we briefly discuss what they like about the excerpt, or what part of it especially catches their attention. I also point out what I like, and what I think works well in the excerpt. Almost any passage will offer more than one good model of elements such as: effective word choice (vivid verbs, just-right adjectives), effective punctuation, sentence variety, parallel structure, use of dialogue or quotations, etc.

Also, students must find and copy one sample of good writing per week on their own. I set a minimum word length (130 words seems to work fine). I collect all the samples (in-class and at-home) at mid-semester and again at the end of the term. I give the collections a grade based on how complete they are: if 15 of a possible 15 samples are handed in, that is 100%. I write brief comments on a few of the selections from the mid-term collection just to let students know I really am paying attention. I also share with the class some of the interesting samples I saw in the mid-term collection: passages from Edgar Allen Poe, Nicholas Sparks, even Jane Austen. Yeah, I was surprised, too!