



Contributor Adrian Nyxs reviews a recent copy of *New Youth Connections*.

# A Teenager Learns to Explain His Life

## Writing at Youth Communication

By **Keith Hefner**

FRANK\* WOULD NOT EXPLAIN WHY HE WANTED TO WRITE A STORY ABOUT "PRACTICING SAFE SEX," BUT HE INSISTED, SO THE TEACHER ASKED HIM TO WRITE A SHORT FIRST DRAFT. FRANK TURNED IN FOUR UNINSPIRED PARAGRAPHS, AND HIS STORY ENDED: "MANY TEENAGERS ARE HAVING CHILDREN WHEN THERE STILL CHILDREN. AIDS IS THE NUMBER 1 REASON THAT TEENS SHOULD PRACTICE SAFE SEX. THE MORE THIS DISEASE SPREADS THE MORE PEOPLE DIE."

Frank was in Youth Communication's journalism program, where I am the founder and executive director. Most of our students are inner-city teenagers from New York City's foster care system and its public high schools. We publish their stories in two magazines, which have a combined circulation of 75,000 copies. Like Frank, many of our students have spotty writing skills. They have bounced from school to school and many speak English as a second language. Our target audience, also teenagers in the city's foster care agencies and public school system, is composed largely of "reluctant readers." Our task is to help those students with weak writing skills write stories that will appeal to young people with poor reading skills. Many of the youngsters hate English class, but writing essays about important topics helps them build skills that they can transfer to other types of writing.

Frank's first draft was about as interesting to our readers as an encyclopedia entry, and it begged the question why Frank wanted to write it. Did he know some-

one who had died of AIDS? Had he engaged in unsafe sex? What was his personal connection, if any, to the topic, and why did he think it was so important for teenagers to "Practice Safe Sex"?

Clearly, Frank was hiding the real reason why he felt passionately about the topic. So, using a Youth Communication worksheet called "Focusing the Story," the teacher asked a series of questions like "Why do you want to write this story?" and "What's the most important point you want to make?" The student gave terse answers, but his response to the last question was especially



The author Keith Hefner, right, discusses an issue of *New Youth Connections* with colleague Tom Brown.

\*The writer published his story anonymously. Frank is a pseudonym.

intriguing. When he came to, “By researching and writing this story, I will learn...” Frank wrote, “Nothing but the loss of my dignity.”

Frank’s statement was practically a plea to the teacher to probe further, which he did simply by writing, “Explain” in the margin. The student “explained”—in writing and in a subsequent conversation—that he had gotten his girlfriend pregnant, she had delivered a son, and then she had moved away with the child, whom he no longer knew. The teacher now understood why Frank wanted to write this story. The teacher was also confident that Frank would be willing to put a lot of effort into it.

Like Frank, most teenagers at Youth Communication write a personal essay as their first story. We find that the teenagers on our staff, especially those with weaker writing abilities, are motivated to improve their skills when the topic is deeply important to them. Through personal essays, young people can learn the basics of all essay writing, such as developing a thesis, supporting the argument with examples, structuring the piece logically, and writing strong transitions and conclusions.

If we think about Frank’s story as a persuasive essay, we can see that his thesis was something like, “Not practicing safe sex got me into a really difficult and sad situation. You shouldn’t make the same mistake.” To write an effective personal essay, he needed to do a couple of things: show why he had not used a condom, explain the effect of that decision, and demonstrate the painful result. By telling his story effectively, Frank had a chance to persuade his peers that if they were sexually active, it was important to practice safe sex.

Like any teacher preparing students to write a complicated essay, Frank’s teacher asked him to break down the story into its major parts and to do a basic outline, which in this case was to tell the story in chronological order. The teacher asked the student to write each part using the skills we teach in our writing workshop, including scene, dialogue, summary, and transitions.

Those exercises helped Frank improve his writing skills. In learning to write scenes, he had practiced using dialogue and description to convey an emotion or idea. He had learned to use summary to explain exactly what the scene meant. He had learned to use transitions to move his story from one idea to the next.

These techniques are the foundation of writing any essay. In a piece about a work of literature, students typically make an argument about a theme in the book and choose scenes from the book as evidence of that

theme. In a personal essay, the student writes those scenes. In both cases, scenes act as evidence for the thesis, transitions move the essay along, and summary ties the evidence to the main point of the essay.

After several attempts, Frank began his story:

“It was raining outside and our plans were squashed. My girlfriend Kimberly and I had nothing to do. ‘Let’s watch some TV,’ she said to me, but I had other plans. Little did I know they would lead to my biggest mistake.”

The first scene ended at the point when Kimberly found out she was pregnant, which Frank said made her “confused and emotional.” Writing is compelling when it’s vivid, so the teacher asked Frank to show the scene at that moment as well. It took him several drafts. In marginal comments the instructor reminded Frank of how he had used dialogue in a previous piece. He also challenged him to describe and show the emotions. Eventually Frank wrote:

“She went crazy. She was crying, almost shaking. She talked about running away from home. When I told her that was a stupid idea, she began to scream that she was going to tell her mother. . . . I asked her if she wanted a second opinion. She replied, ‘No, I’m quite sure I’m pregnant.’ Then she began to vomit.”

Scene by scene, transition by transition, the teacher asked Frank to show, tell, explain, and connect ideas. As time went on, he also focused Frank on correcting his spelling and grammatical errors, but not until Frank was fully committed to the piece, and the teacher could explain that careless mistakes could drain the story of much of its power.

Eventually Frank built his entire story, including its painful end. His girlfriend and her mother had moved away, cutting him out of his son’s life. He ended his essay with a reference to his original title and premise:

“We should have used a condom that day. Not only to protect ourselves, but to protect everyone around us who was affected by our behavior. My girlfriend became a mother at 14 and had to leave school. Her life was ruined and mine was changed forever. Had we been responsible that fall day five years ago, things might have worked out better.

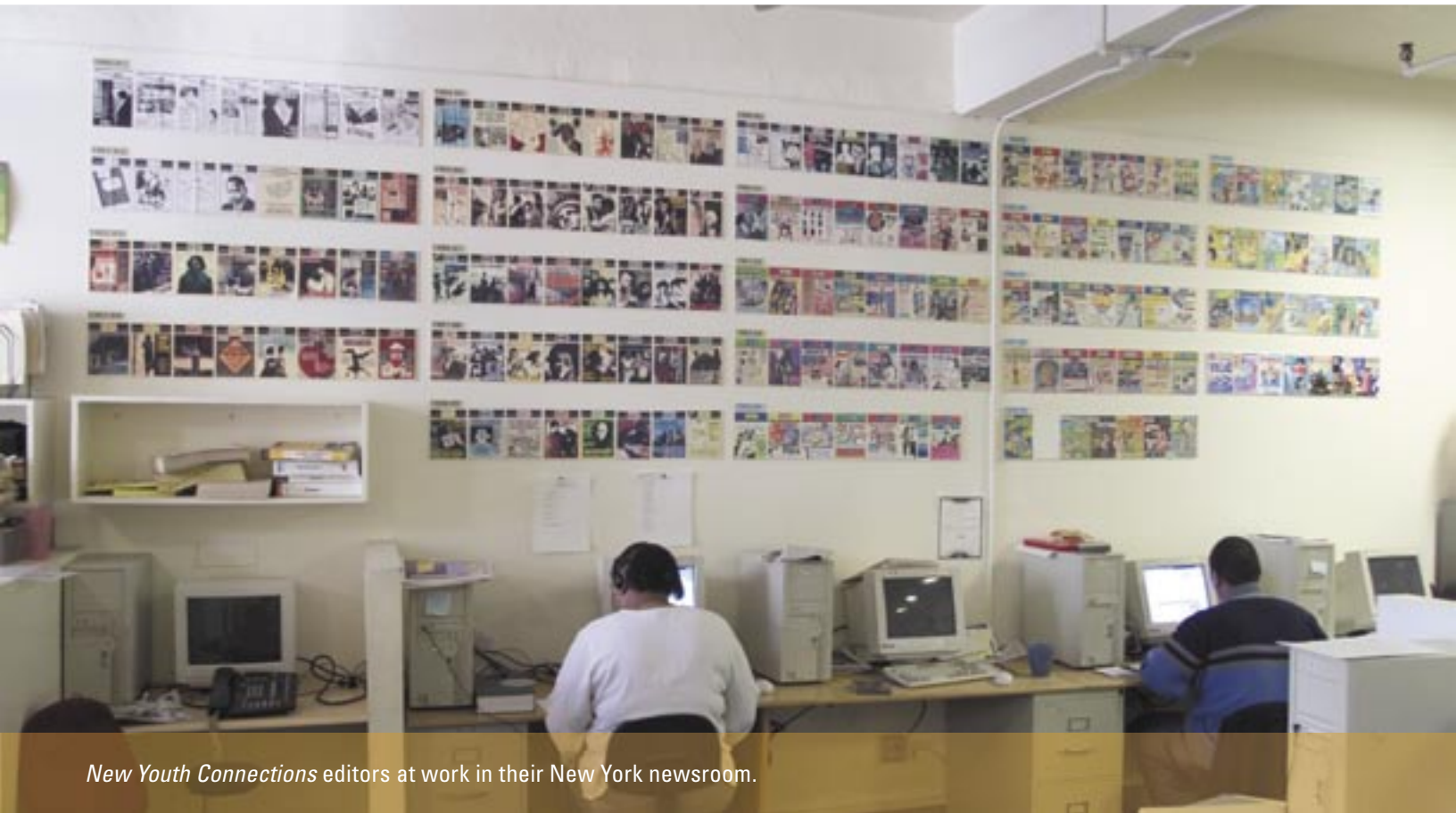
“In the last three years I’ve probably spent ten days with my son. I bounce him on my lap and play airplane with him, but he doesn’t remember me and he doesn’t call me Dad. Will he ever acknowledge me when I’m older? Will he ever understand?”

In this case, Frank’s feelings of shame and loss were both the motivation and the focus of the story. Two

months earlier, Frank didn't have the skill to write a story that might persuade other young people to use a condom if they were sexually active. He also had little understanding of the building blocks of a good essay. His first draft was health-class gibberish that would have convinced no one. But his final draft, which showed the full cascade of negative effects and the intensity of his loss, was an extremely convincing argument for not fathering a child before you are ready for one that was guaranteed to be riveting to his peers. To write that draft, he had to learn to make an argument and support it, and to use detailed, compelling language that could

persuade a reader to accept his thesis—the same skills we want students to use in all of their writing.

At Youth Communication, we often see students with weak skills and a desire only to write about their personal experiences. We capitalize on that desire to help teenagers who hate English classes write meaningful stories. By holding those personal essays to the same rigorous standards that we use in teaching writing in other genres, we teach students methods that are transferable to more abstract topics, like reported stories, reviews, and political and cultural essays. They tell us they do better in their English classes, too. ■



*New Youth Connections* editors at work in their New York newsroom.

### The Story of Youth Communication

Youth Communication, founded in 1980, publishes *New Youth Connections*, a magazine by New York City public high school students, and *Represent*, a national magazine written by and for teenagers in foster care. About 100 teenagers a year participate in Youth Communication's writing programs, and several have gone on to prominent careers in writing and journalism, including the novelists Edwidge Danticat

and Veronica Chambers, and foreign bureau chiefs at the *New York Times* and *Newsday*. Teen stories from Youth Communication's publications are widely reprinted in anthologies and textbooks, including the Writers Inc. high school English textbook series. See [www.youthcomm.org](http://www.youthcomm.org) for more information and sample stories.