Week 13 - Answers
Raimes (1983), Chapter 7: Techniques in Using Controlled Writing

1. What is the difference between controlled and guided writing/composition?

Before we begin our discussion of the difference between controlled and guided writing/composition it is important to note that controlled writing is a term which is used as a superordinate for a rather wide range of different types of writing activities. This means when referring to both controlled and guided writing/composition collectively people will simply use the term `controlled writing` in the same way that people use the term `cow` when referring to both male and female bovine creatures. Just make sure you're aware of this because throughout these answers I will be using controlled writing is a superordinate term to refer to both unless specified.

There is a fine line between what is referred to as controlled and guided composition as both are fuzzy categories and tend to overlap. This is discussed because they tend to be the premiere types of controlled writing activities and one is supposed to blend into the other. The chief difference between them is the amount of control imposed from above in the activity/exercise. It should be noted that this control can generally be equated with the amount of contextualization in the form of co-text. Generally, the more corresponding text, the more control there will be. Students work/do something with the text and outcomes are more fixed as a result. Thus, people generally tend to think of controlled composition as being much more closed-ended. This means that often in controlled composition activities there is one perfect answer for each question, or at least a highly limited set of acceptable answers for a specific task or question. Controlled writing is generally considered to be more form focused. On this assumption, students also often don't need to be very creative in controlled writing activities. Guided composition tends to impose more general guidelines as to how the writing should ensue but doesn't necessarily control the specific forms necessary to completing the writing. These types of tasks are often more meaning focused or have a focus related certain aspects of the composition process. Based on this simplified distinction we can claim they controlled composition generally focuses more on forms, or the writing part of writing while guided writing tends to focus more on bigger idea of planning and integrating many skills or the composing part of writing.

2. What are some of the chief advantages of using controlled writing in the classroom?

The chief advantages of using controlled writing classroom are its control and flexibility. The advantages of the ability to control the specific outcomes
of the writing activity cannot be overestimated. This is an advantage both from the teacher's and students' point of view. From the teacher's point of view controlled writing activities may take a relatively short time to create and are usually very easy to grade. Thus, controlled writing activities allow the teacher to engage students in writing activities without having to worry about how they are going to have to correct it or access it. In this way teachers can assign a fairly large amount of different kinds of controlled writing activities without having to worry about that tremendous time it is going to take for them to deal with the aftereffects. From the students' point of view controlled writing is also good because it allows them to focus on one thing or a limited number of things at a time. If the teacher has done her/his job well and set up controlled writing activities to try to focus on problem areas the students have shown during the course of the class then the student should be practicing the points that they might need to develop more and their attention will be focused on those problem areas. Thus, carefully planned use of controlled writing activities can allow a teacher to really get students engaged in a lot of very useful and different types of writing practice. This can be particularly useful when controlled writing is used alongside some of the other different techniques that we've talked about in this course such as practical writing, using all skills, as well as using graphics and texts for writing. All these really do, or certainly can, fall into a controlled writing point of view. In this way we can see that controlled writing is highly flexible. With a little planning almost everything can become controlled. It is important to remember that controlled writing as well should also have some sort of focus or reason underlying it and it is therefore most easily done in relation to the practical writing we discussed in the previous week.

This is one aspect of controlled writing that textbook writers and course developers often ignore. In their haste to create controlled writing tasks quickly they often throw the task together which consists of items which are neither authentic nor contextualized. People, therefore, often think of controlled writing as being a way of teaching grammar or forms only. It is very important that a controlled writing task, like everything else you do in the classroom, is meaningful. Yet, this is ignored or teachers are not sure how to make something meaningful and has a purpose. It is, however, often commented on by students and also teachers who give controlled writing, that it is boring and not interesting for the students. It is simply too controlled. It easy to counter these complaints if we think first about creating a clear purpose for why the students are engaged in the controlled writing. Every engagement with language needs to be purposeful. The reasons can be, again, real world or pedagogical, but the bottom line is that there has to be some sort of reason why the students are doing this and the students if they are old enough (for pedagogical tasks) should be aware of that purpose.

The other thing, and this ties in with the reason or purpose, is that there needs to be a clear context in which the controlled writing is embedded. This means that we not only need to have a reason but we also need to have an audience and a surrounding context for the writing, i.e., where will this writing appear. It is easy to see here that often than we can
work context in with the purpose of the writing. What this basically means is that a controlled writing activity should be introduced to the students and this introduction must contain both a clear context and purpose for why the writing must be done. They seem like small things but they are extremely important in trying to make our classroom, and what we do the classroom, much more authentic.

3. What are some of the representative controlled writing activities?

Controlled composition
When people think of controlled writing activities it is usually controlled composition that people generally think of first. These usually include texts that have had certain elements removed or have certain elements which are not useful or somehow need to be changed. In doing these we try to get our students to focus on a specific form focused problem and often things related to grammar or vocabulary. This is good for us because this is similar to the revision process in that both deal with changing a ready made text to make it better.

Question and answer
This technique is often used to as a way of getting students to build outlines in a more controlled way. It can also be used as a way of generating ideas and even sentences which can be turned into more formal pieces of writing from spoken forms. In this way, it is often related to interviewing and uses the results of the interview which are either tape/video recorded and transcribed or just noted down as a way of scaffolding the writing process. This works well for us because it is a perfect seamless connection between speaking and writing. In effect students need to turn speaking into writing. Fun!

Guided composition
This refers to, as mentioned above, activities which engage the students in actually creating more open-ended compositions. Different levels and amounts of control however can be introduced to make this in theory easier (more control - more close-ended) or more difficult (less control - more open-ended).

Sentence combining
This one is easy to get a grip on as we have already done this in this class. Sentence combining gets the students involved in just what the name implies; sentence combining. This can be tweaked by picking certain types of sentences to be combined or having them combine a certain number of sentences. Thus even in something seemingly straightforward there are still possibilities for diversity. Again, like question and answer, this is often a way of converting the simpler even incomplete forms of speaking into the more complex forms of writing.

Parallel writing
Parallel writing is somewhat related to copying but with a twist. Instead of simply copying certain information, which is provided and possibly first needs to be written out (this step can be skipped), the student needs to change or add to the information from the model. Thus, parallel writing can best be described as rewriting with different basic information, which again is provided.
4. What kind of student can the teacher use controlled writing activities with?
Any students, regardless of their level can and should be able to do controlled writing. That is the beauty of the flexibility of controlled writing. In theory, it should be quite easy for teachers to do controlled writing with any group students but they need to think of certain variables in order to make sure the controlled writing matches the student profile well. This is a basic part of lesson planning and curriculum design so we are not claiming anything special here. Designing controlled writing activities, however, is made a little simpler by the fact that we have certain prototypes which we can use to develop much more diverse and various types of controlled writing activities. Once we understand the prototypes and how they were then it is just a matter of expanding them either outwards, upwards, or downwards, however we need to expand in order to get them to suit our students and the particular needs that we have. This itself as a natural process of materials design.

5. How can controlled writing be used in tandem with the process approach?
The best way of integrating controlled writing and the process approach is to design the writing activity around one step in the writing process. Through this simple organizational routine we break the writing process down into bite-sized chunks which can easily be handled both by the teachers and the students. Thus brainstorming and different types of brainstorming can be turned into controlled writing activities by, for example, inserting blanks into lists. Students could have to revise or fix up thesis statements/topic sentences. Even outlining can easily be turned into a controlled writing activity.