
Introduction

Too often, teaching writing has been reduced to a series of educator-generated rules or prescriptions designed to “unpack” what it means to be a good writer and then simply to share those rules with students. The goal, increasingly, has been to produce successful test takers. For example, at a school where I often work, students were studying genres and at a particular moment were working on fantasy. Outside our school’s windows there’s an armory built at the turn of the 20th century. It looks like a fort, literally like some sort of 13th century English fort (at least how I imagine an old English fort to look). When I asked teachers whether or not their students were given the opportunity to look out the window and to use the building as an inspiration for their stories, none had. Their reason was simple and clear. “We just don’t have time to do it. We have to get students ready for the test.”

These are good, in fact some are very good teachers, all of whom have the students’ best interests at heart. But teachers, principals, and superintendents are under such pressure to “teach to the test,” they sometimes have difficulty seeing the forest for the trees. They are asked to march through genres like Sherman marching through the South. Each genre is a city that needs to be burned on the way to the great ocean of accountability. The students, I’m sure, often feel like they are on one of those European tours where you spend just enough time in a city to take a few photos before moving on to the next destination. Teachers are too often asked to teach writing through textbook-generated rubrics pasted onto our student’s minds and hung throughout the classroom like flags. This approach, in my opinion, is destined to fail. I don’t mean to imply that some students won’t learn to write in this way. What I mean is this . . .

When we teach writing by pasting a set of do’s and don’ts onto our students’ compliant and at times non-compliant minds, it’s like creating a façade for a house held up by termite-attacked timbers. The “house” might look good for the real estate listings (tests), but ultimately we are not really paying attention to the basic deficiencies in the “structure” itself; in the case of writing instruction, to the deficiencies in our students’ thinking skills.

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If we continue to teach writing by prioritizing façade over the soundness of our students' intellectual foundations, we fail to use the opportunity given to us to teach deep, creative, critical, confident, and empowered thinking.

I am not saying that using rubrics is necessarily "bad." It's just incomplete. Rubrics do provide students with the opportunity to understand what is expected of them and help to make grading more transparent. The problem with rubric-centered teaching, however, is that it is often set unrealistically and harmfully "high," the origins of the rubrics are hidden, and it is too often disconnected from the language and experience of the students we are teaching. Students rarely have a hand in helping to determine which rules to follow. Rubrics are often just "there" and students are expected to follow them as if they were the "Ten Commandments of Writing" and are supposed to measure their own writing by these seemingly immutable, universal, and "God-given" standards. Because of this, students understand these rules superficially but don't often internalize them. They are flat, static, alien and as I've said, don't encourage deep and critical thinking. If students don't feel they have participated in the creation of rules, unless their peers and their teachers have had a hand in generating these rules, they are less likely to internalize and *really* understand them. Therefore, there is less likelihood that these lessons will ever be transferable, "played with," or individualized. A rule is a rule, is a rule, and kids can certainly "spit" them back at you. But is this what we want? Do we want students to write as if they were "painting by numbers"? Do we want writing to follow a formula but be devoid of energy, creativity, and individuality?

I would hope the answer is, "No, of course not." We want our students to be able to write, think, and problem solve creatively. We want their writing to express their unique voices and at the same time to follow certain conventions that will make their writing attractive and comprehensible for their intended audience. We want our teaching to empower our students to live a life that is satisfying, challenging, and fulfilling.

Perhaps before we go on, we need to "check in" and ask ourselves a question to make sure we are "on the same page." What *are* we teaching writing for anyway? I know that seems like a question whose answer is self-evident. You might answer, "We are teaching students to write so they can have the tools that will help them be successful." OK, now the next question . . . What do you mean when you say "successful"? "To be able to function well in the society," you might say. OK, what does it take to be successful? "Well, writing and reading," you might answer. But, if you really thought about it for a second and thought about the times when you felt that you have successfully managed your life, you might also conclude that you needed other skills as well . . . creativity, confidence, patience, diligence, and social skills to help you to achieve what you consider success.

So, following this logic, we are destined to *fail* as writing instructors if we continue to teach writing by reducing it to a list of teacher or

textbook-generated commands. By teaching in this way, we practically insure that many of our students will attain neither the confidence nor the intellectual and social flexibility needed to become successful adults. Additionally, we make *our* jobs harder and harder as we continually attempt to graft these writing “truths” onto our students’ brains without their input, mutual exploration, and discovery. Engaged students are better-behaved students. They might be noisy and chaotic at times, but it is not because they are bored and attempting to subvert instruction, instead it is because genuine intellectual engagement is often passionate and messy.

HOW DO WE ACCOMPLISH THIS?

Students need to understand that writing well is not simply a result of following mysteriously generated rules, but that rules and convention derive from an understanding of language and composition *they* can actually grasp internally. The more students embrace an *inner* understanding of linguistic conventions, the more they will take ownership in these conventions and the more easily they will be able to adopt them to fit various circumstances.

My basic idea is this . . .

When teaching writing, it is important to identify, acknowledge, build upon, and utilize the experiences and knowledge of your students.

For instance, when teaching how to begin a story, ask students what they already know about how a movie trailer works. When we teach sequential thinking, ask students to identify some of the activities they do sequentially, like a relay race or brushing their teeth. When teaching topic selection, tap into the everyday experiences of childhood as sources for their stories like, for instance, when they got lost. Students will understand and really internalize the craft of writing if you are able to demonstrate the parallels between what you are trying to teach and what your students have experienced in everyday life.

This book is about how to teach writing by acknowledging and taking advantage of what students already know. This book is about empowering students to realize that *they* can be “co-creators” of their own understanding of what *good* writing is. This book is about realizing that we are not teaching “just” writing but that we are teaching thinking skills, skills that will prepare students not just to be successful on tests, but for life. This book is about “composting the intellectual soil” in preparation for planting the seeds of the writer’s craft. This book is about helping students to

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feel that their writing is important and meaningful and not simply a chore imposed from the “outside.”

Remember, we learn not only by what we are taught, but also by *how* we are taught. The delivery system for learning is every bit as important as *what* we are learning.

Putting Everyday Life on the Page will have chapters devoted to different aspects of the writer’s craft: Beginnings, Sequential Thinking, Observation and Description, Characters, Place, and Endings. It will also have a chapter dedicated to how to establish a culture in your classroom that encourages writing and another on how to motivate students by finding ways to make student writing meaningful and purposeful.

While this book is valuable for all those who are teaching writing, the targeted audience is Grades 2–7. I have not delineated specific grades for the various suggested activities. You know your student’s abilities better than I do and targeting certain exercises for certain grades falls into the category of “prescriptive learning” that I’m trying to avoid. Additionally, I’ve made a point of not specifically mentioning ELL (English Language Learners). This book is about taking advantage of and building on the experiences that students bring into the classroom. It goes without saying that this includes the rich and diverse experiences of those students who have moved to the United States from other countries. I vividly remember the excitement and interest generated at the Museum School, when we created a “Hall of Immigration” and invited students to bring in, create exhibitions of, and labels for cans of food eaten and cooking utensils used in their households, as well the rich writing that came from discussions of their first impressions of the United States.

Putting Everyday Life on the Page will, I hope, give you some new ways to excite your students about writing and help to make your job easier and more enjoyable. Please use the ideas in this book not as prescriptions to be meticulously followed but as intellectual trampolines that will help you experiment and to improvise. I am also very interested to learn about your experiences utilizing this book. I am setting part of my Web site (MarcLevitt.org) site that will allow all of us to share with each other, ideas, and activities generated from this book.

Remember, writing is above all a technology. Because we take it for granted, because it has always been around us, we forget how weird and abstract it really is. We are making letters that correspond to sounds, that when put together form words and sentences which, as best as we can, reproduce experiences, thoughts, feelings, etc., that we want to convey. Putting these sounds together on paper to make sense of and to describe an experience is difficult work. It is being made more difficult, in my

opinion, by the pressures surrounding its teaching and accountability. Throwing water into a field might let you get wet if you jump into the puddle you've just created, but it doesn't mean you will have a place to swim. A pool needs to be built and water added. We can get students to follow the rules, but without "building the pool," we make our job and our student's work more difficult, less fulfilling, and ultimately not as sustainable.

I hope that you enjoy this book and thanks for giving it a chance. One bit of advice about reading it, if you don't mind from the great Lewis Carroll, "Where shall I begin, please, your Majesty?" he asked. "Begin at the beginning," the King said, gravely, "and go on till you come to the end: then stop."

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