

RIGHT-ANSWER WRITING

**The Process and
the Prompt**

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**I dedicate this book to my good friend, colleague, and editor,
Lois Bridges, who is always there with brave words
of wisdom, gentle kindness, and a compassionate
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Enjoy our rewarding profession,
Ardie

INTRODUCTION

Dear Mr. Lafalce,

I have adopted a humpback whale named Midnight. In my whalewatch newsletter, I read that President Clinton is supporting whaling. This makes me very mad. And I want to do something about it. I have gone on two whalewatches, and I like seeing whales. I am a member of the Kids For Saving Earth club. I am nine years old. I want to tell President Clinton why he should stop whaling because so many people enjoy whalewatching. But we can't enjoy it if there is no whales. We have to stop *Now*. Whales did not come to the earth to be killed by *man*. They came to live their *own* lives just like us. Why do people do this to whales? When whales have done nothing to people. Do *we* care that whales are living things? Whales are now on the endangered species list. And that has only happened because of *man*. . . . Some whales are even hunted for dogfood!! Do we want whales for our dog's food? Do we care about the whales? Whales have been around for millions of years. And I want my children and grandchildren to see them.

I want to hear back from you and President Clinton.

Love,
Eric Bream

Eric didn't write this letter in school. He wrote it at home, alone, in his bedroom. He was only in third grade;

nevertheless, this young citizen was already an active participant in our democracy.

It's obvious Eric had a passion, and passion can be a writer's key to the kingdom. But this young activist also knew how to channel that passion. That's because, at the age of nine, Eric saw writing as a powerful tool.

Is this not what we want for all learners? Certainly. But first, some teaching must take place.

RESPONDING TO PRECONCEIVED QUESTIONS AND ANSWERS

If we want learners to successfully respond to tough questions and provide evidence to support their claims (as Eric did), we must first teach them how to effectively and efficiently respond. That is, we must introduce them to the basics of the response process.

Most schools begin by teaching and then testing learners using questions that have *preconceived answers*. That is, both *teachers and test makers already know the right answer* when they present a writing task to learners.

Yet using preconceived questions and answers is but the first step in response writing. After learners understand such basics, I watch their skills blossom when I lead them into authentic purposes for writing. That is, as soon as they have the basics under their belts, I offer learners real reasons for written response. I invite them to taste the power vested in writing—a power they will not understand by simply preparing for and taking tests. Powerful writing is inspired by real issues, real problems, and real-life experiences.

But first things first. The simple basics of written response will ground writers in process and structure and help them understand that *every kind of response task (authentic and preconceived) begins with a request that is meant to be*

✘

Right-Answer Writing

answered and then supported with legitimate evidence. The final product is a right answer.

HOW CAN THIS BOOK HELP?

This book explains the basic *process and structure* of this kind of response writing. It provides an easy step-by-step protocol for constructing written responses to questions—not only those on tests but also those in the workplace, or any questions that require a writer to respond in a cogent and informed manner. I call this particular kind of written response *right-answer writing*.

I grew to understand the fundamentals of right-answer writing when I was serving as a literacy coach. The principal asked me to help a group of eighteen learners who needed to retake the state test they had failed the previous year. After investigating the group's unsuccessful test responses, I asked myself, "What should I do? How can I help these kids succeed?"

What I discovered—through that experience and all those that have followed—is captured in the pages of this book. It worked for most of those eighteen learners, and it has since worked for many others across the country.

But the protocol serves those beyond the classroom, too. Employees use this right-answer protocol for on-the-job writing. Responsive citizens use it like Eric did. Its purposes are many. So it remains a helpful tool for navigating the world, both inside and outside of school.

PRECONCEIVED RIGHT-ANSWER WRITING: INSIDE THE WALLS OF SCHOOL

Right-answer writing done in schools is *response writing*; some call it *constructed response*. It occurs when someone in

a position of authority (e.g., a teacher or a testing company) presents a student with a writing task, after which that writer responds *according to the authority's preconceived protocols*. That is, the authority's goals become the writer's goals. The authority defines the writer's task and then rates his performance. So before the writer even puts pen to paper, he understands that there is a right answer and his goal is to find it and present it.

The student's teacher, his textbook, or a test maker holds the keys to the right-answer kingdom. Their judgments keep learners' answers confined to a specific curricular content. The student may have read widely on a subject, may even know *more* than his teacher; however, the test genre does not usually accommodate for such elaboration and critical extensions, especially if the student's written responses will be electronically corrected (see Pearson Education 2003).

It is only the test genre that contains *preconceived right-answer writing*, where an authority *already knows* the answer when the task is presented to the writer. But there are other kinds of right-answer writing whose answers are not preconceived.

AUTHENTIC RIGHT-ANSWER WRITING: OUTSIDE THE WALLS OF SCHOOL

Teachers and test companies aren't the only ones who pass judgments on right answers and call for strict structures. Employers do, too. Applicants who do not follow an acceptable résumé protocol may not get any further than mailing it in. A survey of 120 American corporations employing eight million people found that

Writing is a "threshold skill" for both employment and promotion, particularly for salaried employees. Half the responding companies report that they

take writing into consideration when hiring professional employees. “In most cases, writing ability could be your ticket in . . . or it could be your ticket out,” said one respondent. (National Commission on Writing 2004, p. 5)

Most job-related writing is right-answer writing. That is, employers want employees to answer their questions using only the basic essentials—legitimate, relevant facts—in their reports. Many even provide an outline form or a grid sheet to keep their employees from going astray. And of course, employers want only right answers.

This reminds me of a friend who works for a pharmaceutical company for whom she must write weekly reports. Her boss doesn’t want a report with lots of voice. He doesn’t want to be entertained. He wants a right answer. Most often, my friend is given a definite outline that narrows her response choices. Bosses are busy people; they want reports that are succinct, clear, informative, and correct. This means my friend must have her facts straight before she clicks on the Send button.

Much of the world’s work-related writing is similar to hers; that is, it is strictly confined to a structure—one that will meet an employer’s needs. Workers follow the writing expectations of their employer, similar to the way in which learners follow the writing expectations of their teacher or some test maker. Each must know the appropriate boundaries.

On-the-job writing, if only because of its high stakes, may often feel like a test. The structure of reports even emulates the test genre. That is, the employer’s petitions or questions must be answered correctly and succinctly using legitimate evidence. Nevertheless, employers *do* want to receive new information from their employees. For if employers held preconceived answers, why would they pay employees to uncover them?

RIGHT ANSWERS: FORERUNNERS OF HONEST EVIDENCE

Both in-school and on-the-job right-answer response requires writers to support their answers using evidence. But evidence can be sound or weak, organized or disorganized, legitimate or false—and false evidence can have negative ramifications.

In recent years, several national reporters led readers astray by using faulty and even false evidence. That is, they tried to prove their point but moved outside the right-answer realm by fabricating evidence. They were morally bound to truth in reporting, but instead, they set those morals aside. Such false-answer writing creates distrustful readers.

Could it be that such falsification of evidence, as well as education's overreliance on the testing genre, has created a public that is leery of all writing? Is that why some are suggesting we revamp the American free press and place it in the hands of the government for "correcting"?

In a study called *The Future of the First Amendment Study: What American High School Learners Think About Their Freedoms*, conducted by the John S. and James L. Knight Foundation (2004), close to 50 percent of the high school learners who were questioned said they believe the government can censor the Internet and newspapers. Why would students think that some authoritarian entity should censor America's newspapers? Have these learners not moved beyond those preconceived questions and answers that belong to an authority? Why are they so ready to turn over the keys to the answer kingdom to the government? Have we led them to believe that *all* writing needs to be corrected and cleansed? I hope not.

In a democracy like ours, freedom of speech is a priority. Through the First Amendment, our forefathers anticipated

that active citizens within our democratic society would raise their voices, take a stand, ask questions, and offer alternative views substantiated with *honest* evidence. We pay for such freedoms with trustworthy investigative reporting that uncovers legitimate evidence. It's part of the freedom-of-speech process.

But to understand the integrity vested in this writing responsibility, learners must grow beyond the test genre, beyond authorities holding preconceived answers. That is, they must experience written response in the world outside of school, where answers and evidence are not so cut-and-dried. And this becomes a natural process when we move writing beyond English class and out into the content areas.

WHY TEACH RIGHT-ANSWER WRITING ACROSS THE CONTENT AREAS?

Learners must be able to construct written responses on state assessments, in daily classroom work, and on the SATs, not to mention for writing's myriad real-world purposes. The National Commission on Writing in America's Schools and Colleges (www.collegeboard.com) contends that students must learn to write well in all subjects. Recent federal guidelines promote the same. Thus, we see that response writing has wound its way onto content area tests, and the instructional ramifications are far-reaching.

For example, it used to be that a student's writing grade affected primarily her language arts or English grade. That is, learners were taught and/or assigned poetry, personal narratives, fiction, letter writing, and sometimes even an essay or two, the grading of which was factored into their language arts final average.

But students wrote little or not at all in other school subjects, whose multiple-choice tests called for them to read for,

select, and merely bubble in the correct response. An important factor of multiple choice is defined by its inherent descriptor, *choice*. That is, multiple-choice tests offer a choice of several options, which allow unsure learners an opportunity to covertly guess at an answer, with a fair chance of getting the correct one. Much of the test battle is won when right answers are there to be bubbled.

But now, we've upped the testing ante. Written response has become *the gatekeeper of the subject areas*—science, social studies, technology, and even math. A quick cyber trip through some state content area tests demonstrates that the writing gatekeeper is alive and well and ready to halt the weak and pass the strong. For example, brief and extended written responses can be found in the state assessments of New York, Ohio, Virginia, Michigan, Delaware, Kentucky, Illinois, Nevada, Colorado, Connecticut, Vermont, Washington, and others (see listing of state education websites on the accompanying CD).

And considering the consequences for failure, it is exceedingly important that test takers be able to competently and confidently construct their responses in a clear, concise, and correct manner. Their grades, and eventually graduation, depend on that ability.

NO TIME FOR MULTIPLE DRAFTS!

A number of literacy authorities have been objecting to the on-demand written-response tests that don't allow time for multiple drafts and revision. Yet some who write for a living see another side of this issue. For example, here's what news columnist Brent Staples (2005) has to say about on-demand writing: "Long-term projects are important, but they do not cover all of the kinds of writing that learners will be called upon to produce either in college or in their lives. On the contrary, substantive writing on demand for reports,

correspondence and even e-mail is now a common feature of corporate life.”

Let’s face it. There are times in school and on the job when we must write well and write quickly—times when we cannot construct rough drafts. So early on, we need to introduce writers to first-draft, on-demand writing.

BEGIN AT THE BEGINNING

There is, then, good reason to teach right-answer writing in our schools. Fortunately, it is a fairly simplistic learning experience, one that’s primarily about structure and factual evidence. And the good news is that even struggling writers have conquered the simple steps outlined in this book.

WHAT’S INSIDE?

This work contains a CD and three books. Book I, *Right-Answer Writing: The Process and the Prompt*, focuses on prompts and the right-answer protocol. Prompts are the assigned tasks to which writers respond, and knowing a prompt both inside and out is the first step to crafting a right answer. But once the prompt is analyzed, writers must move on. The right-answer protocol (RAP) will be their guide, for it is the foundation for creating a right answer.

The protocol’s guidelines are contained within three basic steps, which are described in this first book:

1. Develop an introduction.
2. Construct a body of evidence.
3. Draw a conclusion.

After explaining those steps, I also discuss tips for editing and enhancing a response as well as the tools that support

the process. For example, the handy RAP Rubric is a cross-curricular assessment tool that both teachers and learners find helpful. Useful maps and organizers, such as the RAP Sandwich and the RAP Framework, have become guiding mind's-eye images for responders of all ages. Plus, the Single- and Multiple-Paragraph Packages aid writers in moving between single- and multiple-paragraph responses.

Once responders have internalized the right-answer protocol, they can more confidently move outside its boundaries and into the persuasive writing described in Book II. There, we'll stretch beyond that rigid, right-answer structure, expanding and enhancing it. Thus, Book II, *Right-Answer Writing: The Persuasive Essay* leaves preconceived right answers behind and calls for more student questioning, evaluation, creativity, and critical reflection. Yet, as writers stretch into more voice, choice, and authenticity, they'll keep some components of the right-answer protocol close at hand.

In Book III, *Right-Answer Writing: The Research Paper*, I show how some colleagues and I used the right-answer protocol within the research process. This last volume takes readers step-by-step through a tried-and-true research protocol that works in any subject. Your students will say, "Someone has finally taught me how to do research!"

What Else Is Included?

The books are accompanied by a CD that contains lesson plans, prompts, responses, textual resources, PowerPoint® instructional slides, and more. The CD also offers visuals from which transparencies, copies, and anchor charts can be made. Furthermore, with one click, the website Works Cited section can take you to facilitative resource information. These tools not only support classroom instruction but also facilitate the needs of staff developers.

I included this CD to save busy teachers time. After spending thirty years in the classroom, I understand how precious a

teacher's time is, so I hope this additional resource will allow you more time to relax.

From fourth-grade urban learners to rural eighth-grade social studies classes to the college classroom and the world beyond, these guidelines work. Perhaps that's why the protocol has been used across the country for staff development and in college courses. But it has also been a support for those solitary teachers who are struggling to bring their learners to higher levels of written response.

AND FINALLY . . .

Every citizen of this country can and should become competent in right-answer writing. As a matter of fact, teachers have shared with me how they, themselves, have used the similar response structure that I shared in my book *Better Answers* (2002). Teachers have described how the right-answer protocol wove its way into their own personal lives—how it helped them become better on-the-job writers.

Most of our students will someday confront job-related writing tasks, but unless we find a place for right-answer writing in our school curricula, we limit learners' choices and experiences, both in school and on the job. So I invite you to turn the page and allow me to share what I've learned about the right-answer process.

Thanks for joining me!

“[I] took the National Boards assessments in June. I made sure to follow the Better Answer Protocol. Ardith Cole is correct—it works for adults, too!”

—Beverly Maddox, Middle School Teacher
Little Rock, Arkansas

Book review of *Better Answers* on MiddleWeb

**We have become a culture of control
and have traded mystery for mastery.
Life is larger than science.**

—Rachel Naomi Remen, MD,
The Will to Live and Other Mysteries

Chapter 1

ANALYZING THE PROMPT

The Key to the Right Answer

Look for the answer inside your question.

—Rumi

What does it take to construct a response that looks good and sounds smart? Who sets the boundaries for a right answer? And why is the prompt the key? This chapter provides answers to these and other important questions—answers that shade and hue every step in the right-answer process.

WHAT DOES IT TAKE TO LOOK GOOD AND SOUND SMART ON AN ASSESSMENT?

Taking a test, responding to our employer's request, doing well in an interview—these are all about looking good and sounding smart. We wouldn't show up for a job interview in dirty clothes and an unkempt appearance any more than important written responses should show up with a less than optimal overt appearance. Response writing is valued more when it looks good and sounds smart. And first impressions count.

Sure, we indent to show paragraphing. But it's also an easy way to look good. Sure, we try not to erase much because it's annoying, but we also want to keep our piece looking good,

that is, clean and unsmudged. Sure, there are many ways to introduce our response, but we know that restating the question or petition will make us sound a whole lot smarter. So let's be more open with learners about the importance of first impressions. Share how crucial it is to look good and sound smart.

WHO'S SETTING THE BOUNDARIES?

Imagination is usually considered an advantageous quality, but when just the facts are required, imagination can actually get in the way. Furthermore, much of real-world writing does not involve imagination; it is just-the-facts writing. Think about grocery lists, sales reports, memos, messages, directions. And on school tests, where factual information is expected, a deviation into creative writing can, at times, take an enormous toll. It's always the audience that makes the difference. Here's why that is.

An Audience with Preconceived Answers

Unlike creative writing, which invites considerable imagination, freedom, and openness, right-answer writing involves a more constricted organizational structure and tighter boundaries. That's because responses or answers are preconceived, and someone will be passing judgment on such responses. This means writers should be concerned with that judge's expectations, especially when the stakes are high. If the teacher expects a succinct, correct written response, wise students construct a succinct response—*they stick to what the corrector expects*.

Anytime an authority constructs both the prompts *and* their answers, they narrow the writing field. And creativity can get in the way of that authority's right answer. So although *creative thinking* is usually a handy tool, *creative writing* may not be.

This means that the creativity that abounds in fiction and in personal narratives is far less useful in right-answer writing. When responders are seeking a right answer, the sooner they find it and compose it, the better. This may seem like common sense, but it needs to be clearly articulated.

Anytime writers compose for a reader who holds the keys to the answer kingdom, structure tightens and perspective shifts away from creativity and toward what the correcting audience expects. Voice usually diminishes. Generally, the more voice a piece has, the looser the boundaries. That's why we see minimal voice in a sales report or a science experiment compared with that in a book review or an essay on peace. Students need to know that *sometimes*, less voice is better. But they also need to have a map of the territory *before* they step foot onto it.

MAPPING TESTY TERRITORY

When I have to write a new territory, I make sure I model someone else's map first. That is, I read several garage sale ads before constructing my own. Common sense might tell most of us to do that, but learners need a guide, and that's why the accompanying CD's lesson plans and visuals offer plenty of support for understanding and mapping some right-answer territories.

Reading with Writing in Mind

When learners tread response territories *before* they write them, it allows them to read those territories with writing in mind. And it's even better when those first prototypes are ones whose territories are fairly easy to map. I begin with high-interest, brief response examples—enough to help students understand how a particular kind of written response looks and sounds. They need to get a feel for it, just as I do when writing a newspaper ad. It is only after analyzing

various pieces of right-answer writing that responders are ready to map a territory of their own.

Finding Prototypes for Right-Answer Writing

The CD offers some response prototypes, but the Web is a limitless resource. Many state education departments now electronically publish a variety of prompts, along with written-response examples. The examples range from exemplary models to those in need of improvement. Introduce learners to a variety, only a click away on the CD.

WHY IS THE PROMPT SO IMPORTANT?

A long time ago, the poet Rumi told us to look for the answer inside our question. Considering his wisdom, is it not then reasonable to conclude that the more responders know about prompts, the better their answers will be?

That is why analyzing the prompt is discussed in Book I, Chapter 1. It is the cornerstone for a right answer. In this chapter, I investigate some of the most relevant aspects of prompts. I first investigate the possible prompt inclusions: background information, petitions, and questions. Then I consider how self-based prompts and text-based prompts differ—a difference that, when overlooked, causes writers to respond using the wrong kind of writing. And finally, I look inside questions to view their individual idiosyncrasies. All of this builds a firm foundation for the remainder of the right-answer process.

WHAT'S INSIDE A PROMPT?

What, exactly, is a prompt? Tasks that require test takers to respond in writing are known as *prompts*. However, employers might also present employees with similar tasks. As a matter of fact, good test prompts should prepare learners for

employment and the world outside of school—and some of them do.

Prompts may have one or all of three aspects in common. That is, they may contain *background information*, *petitions*, and/or *questions*.

Inside the Prompt: Background Information

Many prompts present background for a task yet to be revealed. In other words, background information sets up the writer. Here's one from a Georgia 2001 assessment that does just that (all prompts were taken from state education websites; see CD for list of website addresses):

You wake up one morning and find your toy robot staring you in the face. The robot says, "Wake up sleepyhead. Today we are going on an adventure."
Write about what happens.

The first three sentences set up the task by giving background information. The final sentence *tells* the writer what to do. Other prompts *ask* the responder to do something. The variety of ways in which prompts are set up can be mind-boggling for nervous responders.

Background Set Up in the Prompt

Some prompts have *no background information* but merely ask a question or offer a petition. Here's one from Nevada's April 2000 grade 12 writing test:

Discuss an event or situation that taught you a lesson or created a change in your life.

Other prompts offer background to create a context for the responder. Sometimes that background is offered through a

narrative, and other times it's offered via *visuals* or *graphics*. Here's one of Delaware's 2003 science test samples that incorporates both:

Ocean currents affect the weather and long term climatic patterns of a region. Large bodies of water (oceans, the Great Lakes, inland seas) can also affect the weather and climate of an area.

[Next, a diagram offers pictorial information.]

Explain what will happen in the weather as the warm, moist air mass continues to move over the land.

Background Set Up Outside the Prompt

Other background information must be gleaned from passages or pages of narratives, stories, essays, past course work, and such—*information outside the prompt* itself. For instance, here's an example from Vermont's New England Common Assessment Practice Booklet. After reading an article, "Porcupines," by Frances N. Chrystie, students must respond to this prompt:

Explain why porcupines do not have to fight. Use information from the article to support your answer.

I recommend showing students a grand variety of prompts so that nothing surprises them.

Inside the Prompt: Petitions

Prompts can also contain two other elements: questions and petitions. *Questions ask* us to do something, while *petitions tell* us to.

Some writing prompts are straightforward questions: Why does oil float on water? But other prompts contain no actual question. Instead, a *petition* is used, for example: Describe how oil floats on water. This petition uses an *imperative sentence* (a command) to present the task. Such *inside-out questions* can be confusing for students because many do not comprehend petitions as questions. They're searching for question marks, and petitions have none.

I offer this easy connection to demonstrate the relationship between these two terms: "Sometimes your mom asks, 'Would you please make your bed?' But at other times, she commands, 'Make your bed!' Either way, you get the idea, right?"

When offered this example, learners quickly understand the difference between questions and petitions. As a matter of fact, one young man responded with "Well, it's not very polite to *demand*!" And I guess I have to agree. Nevertheless, tests demand and so do employers. So we need lots of experience in order to handle both.

The problem is that many responders skip over a prompt's petitions. Instead, they focus on sentences that end with a question mark. To show the relationship between these two, we have to crawl inside test prompts to see what, exactly, is there. (See the CDs lesson plans and prompt examples.)

Petitions: Explicit or Implicit?

Petitions are confusing for learners. Students ask, "Do I have to write something for every single petition? What about the ones that say, 'Think about all of the friends you've had.' Do I have to write about *all* of my friends?"

Every petition should be considered. Yet some just remind us to think, to be mindful. I call these *implicit petitions*. Other petitions tell us to act, to respond in writing. These *explicit*

petitions, which move beyond just mindful consideration, should *always* be addressed in writing.

Therefore, students should be on the alert when told to *think about, use, consider, locate, find, imagine, and look at*, but when told explicitly to *write about, tell, describe, explain, or compare*, they should address the petition through writing. Chapter 2 explains exactly how to do this by restating the question or petition.

Petition Organizers: Handy Maps That Guide a Response

The most common petition terms lend themselves to a particular answer framework or graphic organizer. For example, responders should reach for a Venn diagram when asked to *compare* elements, but a T-chart when asked to *contrast*, whereas a simple list format will help writers to *analyze*. Such organizers not only direct writers toward an appropriate response but also make note taking more efficient. The CD offers several visuals for helping students better understand petitions through graphic organizers.

Inside the Prompt: Interrogatives

We've discussed the plethora of petitions. But prompts also contain all kinds of questions. Introducing the wide range of potential question terms helps develop interrogative background for all students. You can copy the list of terms from the CD onto a large chart to serve as a ready reference for expanding anyone's repertoire. Just posting this broad question menu helps.

But it also helps to teach students that each interrogative term is somewhat idiosyncratic, because it is those idiosyncrasies that provide cues leading to a right answer. For instance, just knowing to skim for a proper noun when a *who* question occurs helps responders with location skills, which can then lead to a right answer.

PROMPTS: TEXT BASED OR SELF-BASED?

Here we have two common prompts:

On the lines below describe your favorite vacation.

On the lines below describe the steps in the process of metamorphosis.

These prompts look similar, but they differ significantly. The first calls for a more personal kind of response (a personal narrative), which allows considerable creative leeway and an infinite number of right answers. The second calls for a factual response, that is, text-related information, or a right answer. When responders confuse these two, they can be drawn far off course.

I call the more creative, personal response prompts *self-based*. To describe my favorite vacation, I must dig down inside myself and tell about an experience I've had. Parameters are nearly unbounded, inviting ample response avenues—ones that accommodate a broad variety of personal experiences and would also give rise to a wide range of right answers. Most students have plenty of school experience with composing such self-based responses.

However, learners may have less experience in constructing responses based on text facts. Such factual responses contain specific information and require greater exactness, allow less creative leeway, impose tighter boundaries, and are often more academic in content. Responders need to know this.

Furthermore, many assessments now incorporate *text-based prompts* whose responses must include factual information that is located inside some textual resource, which responders must return to for its exact facts. This information

might be a poem they've read or a table of figures or dozens of other possibilities.

What's more, in a few states, such as New York and Delaware, some text-based prompts include document-based questions (also called DBQs). This means a response must use information from recorded historical documents.

There are many other kinds of information created by groups, individuals and organizations that have enduring value. They may include written documents such as wills, tax assessment records, letters, *military service records*, birth records. Visual resources such as *photographs*, maps, *posters*, films, architectural drawings. With growing use of the computer, they might be automated databases of marriages, crime statistics, computerized maps. (Daniels n.d.)

When responders are expected to include such dated information, the testing ante is definitely moved up a notch. That is, students are not only expected to reference and understand each type of information but must also cohesively and cogently weave it into a correct response.

It's easy to see why responders need to intimately understand the difference between text-based and self-based prompts and their responses. Composing a personal response to a text-based prompt takes a huge toll on the work's correctness—and right-answer writing requires correctness. Students need to know this, not only for tests but also because *most career writing is text based—and sometimes even document based*.

After serving as a corrector for some of New York State's written-response assessments, I know that naïve students can be too creative on text-based prompts. After all that

experience with assessing responses, I can honestly say that *teaching writers the difference between text-based and self-based responses is one of the most important ways we can help them succeed.*

PROMPTS: THIN OR THICK?

Some prompts are thin and somewhat simplistic in form, such as Nevada's writing prompt on page 5 or the following one from New York's high school 2001 physics examination draft:

Name the forms of mechanical energy possessed by the system when the block is in position A and in position B.

No lengthy explanation or essay is needed here. The responder must simply name the forms. Thin prompts, like this one, call for little more than a phrase or one-sentence response, a few words. The scoring on this particular prompt demonstrates the leanness of its response: it is worth only one point. It's brief. It's quick.

But other prompts are lengthy, providing not only topic background but also several subtasks, which are presented through multiple petitions and/or questions. A prompt from Washington State's 2002 grade 10 science item does this. Notice all of the subtasks:

A scientist at Acme Chemical found an unlabeled container. He knew the contents were either HCl, NaOH, or NaCl. Using Chart A on page 2 of the Direction and Scenario Booklet:

- ◆ Describe four tests that can be used to determine which chemical was in the container.

- ◆ For each test, tell how it would help him determine which chemical is in the container.

This is a thick prompt. Normally, these prompts not only call for lengthier responses but also hold more point or score value.

PROMPTS: IN WRITING OR IN THE CONTENT AREAS?

Frequently, assessments in reading, science, social studies, and math come packaged with background information and/or rely on course content. Such responses are therefore text dependent (or course dependent). Prompts used in writing assessment are less apt to be text dependent but instead gather their grist from a responder's own life experiences; they are self-based and more open. Accordingly, Florida's 2005 FCAT writing prompt sample offers a far more open venue than the previous text-based science prompts:

Writing Situation: Everyone has done something that he or she will remember.

Directions for Writing: Think about a time you did something that you will always remember. Now write a story about the time you did something that you will always remember.

THE MOST CHALLENGING PROMPTS

I discussed earlier how self-based prompts, like the preceding one, call for the responder to reach into his own life experiences, whereas text-based prompts require references to specific material. But text-based material can vary; sometimes it is

a short article, sometimes a graphic, and at other times it may be a picture or photo the responder must use as evidence to construct a correct answer. Responders who use a self-based experience instead of text-related facts will deviate from a right answer.

Yet some of the most challenging prompts are those that call for *both* a text-based and a self-based response. Learners need lots of experience with these in order to realize the balance that must occur. Here's an example of an extended response prompt from Illinois' grade 8 2003 reading sample assessment. After reading a passage about Doc Marlowe, students are faced with the following prompt:

Would a person like Doc Marlowe best be described as someone to be admired or not admired? Explain why. Use information from the story and your own observations to support your answer.

Here, we see how a text about Doc Marlowe was provided; however, the responder is also told to use her "own observations," which moves that responder into self-based territory. The right answer to this prompt will therefore contain self-based *and* text-based references.

Certainly the variety of prompts is extensive. That is exactly why students must be prepared for an array of situations.

THE VALUE OF QUESTION-RESPONSE RELATIONSHIPS

Throughout life, both in school and in our careers, it's to our advantage to be able to competently construct both brief and extended responses by carefully considering all facets of our prompt. When an employer asks an employee a thick question, like "Why are your figures so low this month?" it's best

to offer the extended response she is expecting. And it will probably help to keep it text based.

A brief response, such as “I didn’t sell as much” or “This occurred because of the Smith contract,” will not be satisfactory. The employer will want a complete explanation that includes every single detail so that the problem can be remedied. Assuredly, constructing brief and extended written responses is a life skill. And careful consideration of tasks or prompts will help each of us hone that skill.

The more familiar students are with question-response relationships, the more prepared they will be when they delve into the right-answer protocol. As a matter of fact, the first step, restate the question, will be a piece of cake!