Dawn and Darren dedicate this fourth edition of *Inside Out* to Dan Kirby and Tom Liner, whose words, attitudes, and savvy ideas live in these pages as they have in all previous editions of this book. Dawn and Darren thank Dan and Tom for trusting them to remain true to what this book has always meant and stood for.

Dawn also dedicates this book to Dan and Cara as loving and supportive family members who tolerated days, nights, and weekends when writing this book consumed her attention and time.

Darren likewise dedicates this book to his wife, Jessi, for her love and understanding, and his parents, for their constant support.
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Preface

This book has a long history. The first edition of Inside Out was published in 1981. Now, in 2013, here’s the fourth edition, thirty-two years later. That’s a long time for a book about teaching writing to be around. Over the decades, some traditions have developed for this book. One is that a Tom Liner poem opens Inside Out, and I am delighted that Tom continued that tradition with us. Another is that real teachers contribute their voices and expertise to the book. You will find that still present in this edition, including a new final chapter (Chapter 15: Conversations with Teachers), which features teachers’ responses to several of the questions that challenge all of us who teach writing. In addition to teachers’ voices, we continue to feature students’ voices in this edition. You’ll see new students’ pieces, and you might recognize a piece or two that was in the previous edition. After all, good writing is good writing, and some students’ pieces were just too good to take out yet.

Featuring a wealth of activities to get you going with writing in your own classroom is central to Inside Out. You’ll find in every chapter multiple activities for working with writing. That’s a strong and valued tradition of this book: an abundance of ideas and activities that you can use confidently and effectively in your classroom tomorrow.

Our view of teaching writing hasn’t changed fundamentally over the years: It still happens from the inside out. That’s a phrase that has become quite popular in the last few years among those who write about teaching writing. We’re proud that Dan Kirby and Tom Liner, the original coauthors of the book, created that phase and that we’ve been using it for over thirty years.

As you might expect, we develop this notion of writing inside out early and often in these pages. In a new chapter (Chapter 1: Finding a Footing for Teaching Writing Well), we provide insights about what the phrase inside out means to us and how adopting this framework will enhance your approaches for teaching writing. In Chapter 2 (Fluency and the Individual Writer), we discuss numerous ways to ease students into writing if they are reluctant, how to lead your students to add an authentic voice and some human life to their writing, and a wide array of activities to promote written fluency for your students. In Chapter 3 (Establishing the Classroom Environment and Building Community), we offer strategies to help you establish a collaborative, productive environment for teaching writing and for having your students work with writing in collaborative ways. In Chapter 4 (Writing Pathways), we lay out the specifics of how to make writing a daily, productive habit for you and your students. Because laying the foundational groundwork for teaching writing is essential to effective instruction and to your students’ development as writers, we’ve taken considerable time to address these aspects of how to grow writers. In Chapters 5–13, we lay out our plans and strategies for teaching writing in the full spectrum of genres, all with the student solidly at the center of instruction, and we end in Chapter 14 as we began, by summing up how an inside-out approach to writing enriches your teaching and your students’ learning.

Traditionally, the authors of Inside Out are writers and teachers themselves who have taught in middle and/or high schools and who are still frequently in middle and high school classrooms. So are we. We strive to keep current with what is happening among
students, in schools, and with teachers. To illustrate this point, look at several chapters: Chapter 12 (Writing About Literature and Other Texts), for writing about various texts, including nontraditional ones; Chapter 7 (Crafting Essays), for ways to work with nonfiction in your classroom; and Chapter 13 (Engaging with Nontraditional Texts), for completely new ideas for working with visual, digital, and Web-based texts. Several years ago, we wouldn’t have known how to write a chapter like 13 because the area of new literacies has only recently emerged as one having an impact on teaching writing in middle and high schools. As another example of how we’ve remained current with issues and content in teaching writing, consider how we've discussed working with technology as a valuable tool for teaching writing. The naïveté about technology that appeared in the second edition of this book has disappeared. Ideas for using technology to enhance the teaching of writing and this book have grown up together. Whereas word processing was once a phenomenon in writing instruction, we are now quite comfortable with using the computer for composing and revising. We’ve long looked to new technologies to enhance our teaching. Throughout this edition, you’ll find lots of new ideas and resources, including an entirely new chapter (Chapter 13: Engaging with Nontraditional Texts) for using technology and for incorporating new literacies into your teaching.

Another tradition that we have maintained is that of looking closely at trends, theories, and best practices for teaching writing. Some of these trends bug us, and the authors of this book have always pinpointed ways in which the Emperor of Writing, whoever that happens to be currently, wears no clothing. Like that last sentence, an irreverent tone crops up from time to time in this book, as it has from the beginning. As the trends change, so do the foci of our critiques. Currently, the rash of high-stakes tests and other evaluation inanities have captured our attention. We don’t have much respect for standardized, high-stakes testing of writing because those evaluations don’t usually measure what they claim to measure. Such tests quantify errors and the teaspoons of writing without paying much attention to individual students’ progress and development, authentic content, and evidence of real voices in students’ writings. Such testing flies in the face of our model of writing, detailed in Chapter 2, which involves moving students first into fluency with their writing, and then into control and precision. There is definitely a time to correct surface errors in writing, and we discuss when and how to do so in Chapter 9 (Revising Writing), as well as in other sections of the book; but error eradication is not the alpha and the omega of writing instruction.

Traditionally, the authors of this book value teachers and the work they do. So do we, so much so that some current critiques of education set our teeth on edge. Holding teachers’ reputations and abilities up for criticism the way that some politicians and so-called education authorities do these days can be nasty stuff. Judging teachers’ effectiveness by tracking how closely they follow a somewhat arbitrary and limiting curriculum, by whether they teach for “the test”—a test that generally does little to improve writing instruction and students’ abilities to write well—is nothing the authors of this book supported in 1981, and it’s nothing the authors of this edition support now. Probably never will. Authentic writing, the topic of Chapter 6, and working with teachers as they become better writers themselves improve writing instruction. Engaging with real teachers as they learn how to teach writing more effectively, with real students as they become better writers, will win out over restrictive curricula and hollow test scores every time. We are also realists, however, who understand the current climate and the demands placed on teachers. We know that you can’t ignore high-stakes assessments. In Chapters 6 (Authentic Writing), 11 (Grading, Evaluating, and Testing Writing), and 14 (Mediating Literate Lives: An Argument for Authentic
Education), we provide suggestions about how to prepare your students in authentic ways for testing without having to sell your soul. Being real and connecting with you and your students are our primary goals, just as they were for those who wrote the earlier editions of this book. Having standards is a good thing, but some of the ways in which teachers are to work with instructional standards border on the absurd. Rigor and learning, having standards for writing and learning, and using authentic assessments are not mutually exclusive and never have been in these pages, in our classes, and in the ideas we share with you. To the contrary, we include an entire chapter (Chapter 11: Grading, Evaluating, and Testing Writing) on ways to assess legitimately your students’ writings. In another entirely new chapter (Chapter 14: Mediating Literate Lives: An Argument for Authentic Education), we focus on how and why writing needs to be authentic to the purpose and context for which it is written. As always, we offer a plethora of ideas in various sections of the book for building a comfortable atmosphere in which writing thrives.

As it has from the beginning, this book also contains sound techniques that, when used in your teaching, will promote best practice and help your students grow as writers. Answering the question of “What is good writing?” can be challenging; we know it when we see it, but how do we explain it to our students to help them develop as writers? Several chapters fit together to help us identify, teach, and respond to writing in ways that will guide our students to be effective writers. Specifically, see Chapter 5 (Identifying Good Writing and Emphasizing Voice); Chapter 8 for loads of ideas on how to respond to your students’ writings; and Chapter 9 for working with your students to revise their writing in effective, authentic ways. After all of their hard work to craft their writing and move into finished, polished products, students—and you—deserve to celebrate. In Chapter 10 (Publishing Writing), we offer numerous ideas for using forms of publishing to celebrate your students’ writing accomplishments, from initial drafts to final products, in short excerpts or full-blown literary magazines. Teaching writing well doesn’t happen without savvy teachers leading the way, and we know that’s who you are and who you want to be throughout your career as a teacher.

In addition to following some of our valued traditions, we’ve introduced new ideas in this edition. Some of these new ideas we’ve already mentioned. Others include techniques for publishing your students’ writings in traditional and new venues (Chapter 10), how to improve vastly the research paper and other core writing assignments (Chapter 7), ideas for working with English language learners (Chapters 2 and 5), activities for responding to literature and other texts (Chapter 8), ways of working with new literacies to connect with your students and improve their thinking and writing (Chapters 10 and 13), and examining the big picture of lifelong uses for writing beyond the classroom, including students who are preparing to enter college (Chapter 14).

We invite you to read this book with an eye for capturing the ideas that resonate with you and that will work for your students. We invite you to read thoughtfully, with pencil in hand for making notes and jotting ideas. Teaching writing is hard work; it’s also fun, and it should be. That’s how writing this book has gone for us: lots of hard work and lots of fun. So, settle in, prop up your feet, and think with us about how to teach writing in ways that improve our own and our students’ thinking about all sorts of topics, including writing itself. Turn the page. Our passage is now beginning.

—Dawn Latta Kirby
Finding a Footing for Teaching Writing Well

Your essential self is precisely what we now need in our schools in order to foster not just a writing community, but in order to foster a community of caring. . . . —Parker Palmer, The Courage to Teach

We live in a new world of teaching writing. It’s a world dominated by curricula that have one clear goal in mind: Students must pass “the writing test.” In some ways, this challenge is being met. More instructional time is devoted to the type of writing that is on the test. Many school districts report that 90 percent or more of their students pass the writing test at a “meets expectations” or above level. We are, after all, teachers who want to do the right thing by our students, and the districts tell us passing the test is the right thing—perhaps the only thing—about which we should care. Most of us, however, know that our outcomes for teaching writing need to be something . . . more. We know that this new world is not always full of our best practices and our students’ most enthused, highest-quality work. The pressure of “the test” has overwhelmed not only our curricula but also our essential teaching selves. As Palmer reminds us, however, our essential selves are critical to successful teaching and learning. Perhaps this evisceration of our essential selves from the curriculum is what we continue to rail against. Ultimately, being held hostage to curricula driven by testing is not doing enough for our students, and fostering writing communities in a test-driven environment is highly challenging.

Worse yet, we know that spending more instructional time on writing does not necessarily result in better writing by our students. We can’t just teach more or longer. We must teach well. “Testing” and “teaching well” are too often at odds. It takes our most experienced, enlightened, and—in this test-driven environment—bravest teachers’ best efforts to improve writing in ways that will carry our students not only through school but also through their lives and careers. The good news is that teachers want to teach well. We return to the university for advanced degrees and participate in seemingly endless professional development in hopes of improving what we do and how we do it. The National Writing Project (www.nwp.org) has had a powerful influence on teachers and on our knowledge about how to teach writing well. As we write, NWP has lost most of its federal funding. Strange days
and a new world are upon us. The question becomes, “How will we deal with strange policies, new technologies, diverse students, and high-stakes testing in ways that allow us to teach writing well?”

In some parts of this book, we cheerlead and encourage you to try to become a strong teacher of writing. In some parts, we invite you to consider teaching challenges and solutions, enticing you to try some of the new strategies that we offer and technologies that we discuss. Most of this book is an attempt to share our successes in teaching (and some of our failures so you might avoid them), the philosophies and beliefs that guide us as teachers, and the strategies that we have used to work with our students to improve writing.

When Dan Kirby and Tom Liner published the first edition of this book in 1981, they suggested that what young writers needed most was freedom to render experience into words in whatever ways they could muster, and they needed adults who would offer strong support and encouragement for those efforts. Some good ideas are worth sticking with no matter how much schools and curricula change.

### Strange Days

Teaching is filled with contradictions and challenges that we strive to overcome in our determination to teach writing well. Let’s explore some of them, raising questions about teaching writing well that may stimulate constructive discussion with your peers and colleagues.

#### Strange Notions About Success

High-stakes and standardized testing are hardly new. For several generations, kids have been subjected to on-demand writing exams and standardized tests of one type or another. If testing and prescribed curricula were all we needed to produce good writers, we’d be seeing dividends by now. We’d see not just decent test scores but also reports from colleges and employers about students’ excellent preparation, learning, and abilities to write well. Yet, national surveys of educational progress continue to show little improvement in students’ abilities to write proficiently. Waves of new standards, test-centered curricula, and more exams haven’t really helped. Universities and employers continue to complain that high school graduates cannot communicate effectively through writing. In some sort of surreal and bizarre logic, many educational polemics think that this situation is actually evidence that we need more standards, more accountability, and more testing. How odd.

#### Strange Notions About Students

One-size-fits-all curricular and standardized exams do not fit the changing, decidedly nonstandardized demographics of contemporary school populations. As a group, our students are more ethnically, linguistically, and socially diverse than ever before. They may bring with them life experiences that have little in common with dominant cultural assumptions. They also bring unique strengths and weaknesses in their language use. Individualized Education Plans (IEPs)—specific instructional sequences for students with special needs—are increasingly common in mainstream classrooms. Although homogenization still exists, especially in urban schools, the once typical suburban classroom
consisting of Anglo, middle-class students is a rarity. To put it simply, one size does not fit all when it comes to the teaching of writing. Students need to explore their strengths and improve areas of weakness in ways that inspire rather than demoralize and promote success rather than failure.

### Strange Notions About Technology

The recent, spectacular revolution in digital media, online interactivity, and personal communication technology is another indication of changing times. Technology, including the advent of collaborative digital environments and capabilities for immediate networking, has changed how many people read and write daily. This point is especially true of adolescents, who tend to be the most eager adopters of new media tools.

Advances in technology and communications are poised to open new vistas for teachers and schools. When we constructively channel students’ interests in gadgets, media, and social networks, we help create sophisticated and agile communicators, comfortable with and skilled in a variety of both new and conventional “literacies.” Schools, however, are notoriously conservative institutions; changes can be glacial.

We teachers work with the diverse students who walk into our classrooms. We find ways to connect with our students and get them involved in authentic writing. We prepare them to write successfully for a variety of purposes, including the artificial situations of high-stakes exams. We work hard not to kill the notion that learning to write well can be an enlightening experience. We strive to develop thoughtful, fluent students who are prepared for a full life beyond high school. Ideally, we accomplish all of these goals and provide opportunities for students to discover that writing is a genuinely creative, liberating, and socially transformative act.

### Strange Notions About Teaching

The good news is that teaching writing effectively, even in these strange days, is possible. When Dan Kirby and Tom Liner wrote the first edition of this book, they were part of an upstart vanguard of teacher-writers speaking out in opposition to the moss-bound certainties of “composition” and how it ought to be taught to young people. We’ve come a long way since those days, and a lot of good ideas from those years have found their way into classrooms. Some of those upstart ideas now comprise best practice, including teaching writing as processes, acknowledging the value of students’ personal experiences and stories, and promoting students’ choices in determining topics for writing. These ideas, commonplace in schools today, were renegade—if not downright iconoclastic—notions just a few decades ago.

The work is far from done, however. Several conservative policy makers—who are rarely experienced teachers—prefer that “good writing” fits a narrow, standardized, and sanitized definition. They want us teachers to boil down writing assessment to a number on a spreadsheet and to abandon concepts like voice and style in favor of a few test-approved formats. Not everyone is inspired by the idea that effective writing instruction maximizes individual potential and independent voices. In the face of these challenges, we need teachers who are prepared to buck stereotypes, challenge convention, speak truth to the powers that be, and question some very stubborn assumptions.
Much about teaching writing is a local, private experience: Teachers close classroom doors; set aside the master plans of politicians, experts, and pundits; and get busy helping students improve as writers and thinkers. Good writing teachers have operated this way for decades. Despite the latest newfangled state or district “initiative,” writing teachers determine in quiet, sometimes subversive ways, to develop stronger student writers. As much as we might like to view ourselves as philosophical islands or instructional double agents, being able to articulate, support, and defend our teaching decisions—particularly when they conflict with prevailing assumptions, conventional wisdom, and uninformed policy—is more important than ever.

Succeeding as a writing teacher requires a pragmatic awareness of educational politics and the conflicts and questions within our discipline and a solid grasp of public notions about how writing classes should look, what skills are most important for students, and why writing might be useful or important. Public opinion is too often at odds with instructional practices that are informed by research and by teachers’ experiences with students.

Writing teachers grapple with presumptions and pronouncements, stereotypes and challenges that usually are not new. In fact, some of the challenges we address next are very similar to those discussed in the first edition (1981) of this book. Our thinking about these issues yields more questions than correct answers. It would be nice to think that we have made substantial progress in changing how the public views what we do. But like vampires and zombies, some bad ideas just won’t stay dead.

Challenge 1: What to Do About Grammar

When a new acquaintance learns that you teach English, she may say, “I’ll have to be careful with my grammar.” It’s remarkable how often English and writing teachers encounter this sentiment. It says a lot about what many people remember from their years in English classrooms, namely, that grammatical correctness is what matters most with language use. Teachers of writing, meanwhile, appear as a strange breed of uptight nerd, hypersensitive to spoken and written miscues, and ready to pounce on any deviation.

Although grammar drills are no longer common (at least not by that name), instruction in the nuts and bolts of language use is, reasonably, a part of what writing teachers do. The question then becomes, “How?” How do we best teach grammar? This is by no means a settled question. A raft of twentieth-century studies suggests that grammar taught as an isolated subject has no positive effect on students’ ability to write. The idea of teaching grammar in context proposes that we embed small units of mini-instruction as occasions present themselves with student work. Another school of thought suggests that an understanding of how sentences are constructed through an updated linguistic lens helps students. Added to these different approaches are public perceptions of what students should know about grammar (which are usually quite “old school”), along with state-, district-, and school-based policies that may still be based on traditional assumptions.

Whatever the research about grammar instruction might indicate, new teachers often have to learn the hard way. In one of his early teaching experiences, Darren was determined that his students would learn how to use the semicolon correctly in their writing. He lectured them on semicolon rules and usage and created worksheets on which students fixed semicolon errors and created their own correct sentences. His students completed these
exercises successfully and generally seemed to be getting the concept. Their subsequent writing, however, revealed no change in their correct use of punctuation, be it semicolons or anything else. We’re betting you’ve had similar instructional experiences. This approach helps our students “learn” an isolated skill—how to do semicolon worksheets—without shifting any new understandings to their own writing.

If writing were a “whole = sum of the parts” process (like building a birdhouse or making a cupcake), our teaching lives would be a lot easier. We could just follow a writing recipe or set of instructions, and learning the rules in isolation (like how to cut wood using a jigsaw, or how to measure and blend ingredients) would build successful results. It’s not so easy, however. Good writing is much more than the sum of its parts. Attempting to teach writing as a process of identifying and practicing various components that can then be combined, assembly-line style, into an effective piece of writing just doesn’t work.

Grammar instruction isn’t going away, nor should it. Given what we know about students and writing, however, teaching grammar traditionally does not equate with teaching writing. Some of the questions with which teachers must grapple concerning grammar include the following:

- How should teachers handle conflicting notions of grammar instruction, whether from administrators, parents, or the public?
- How should progressive teachers deal with grammar instruction, given that certain high-stakes exams may still test for isolated grammar knowledge?
- Are certain grammar concepts ever worth teaching separately from writing? If so, which ones, and how?
- How important is correct grammar use in the bigger writing picture, particularly in an increasingly digital age?

Teaching is full of uncertainty. Will students do well on the test? Will my evaluations go well? Am I teaching enough Shakespeare for the AP exam? These are relatively trivial questions in the grand scheme of our teaching lives and can be answered with a simple yes or no. Other questions, however, are not so easily answered; in fact, we’re not sure our questions about teaching have set answers with which we will agree next year or even next week. We ask questions to prompt thinking, not necessarily to provide correct answers. We invite you to think along with us about what seems like today’s “right” answer for your teaching context.

**Challenge 2: What to Do About Writing Formulas and Formats**

When community businesspeople learn you teach English, they say, “What’s with kids these days? I can’t hire someone without sending them through a remedial writing course. They struggle putting even basic ideas together.” Let’s gain some perspective by considering this published commentary:

> The rising generation cannot spell, because it learned to read by the word-method; it is hampered in the use of dictionaries, because it never learned the alphabet; its English is slipshod and commonplace, because it does not know the sources and resources of its own language. (Comer 2010, 28)

That’s from a 1911 article in *Atlantic Monthly*, and it illustrates an important point to keep in mind: The young have forever been cited for their perceived failure to measure up to the
expectations of their elders. This generational bias can be checked in part by reminding ourselves of basic human potential and the tendency of nostalgia to erase our own educational shortcomings.

Writing is an act of creation, which makes writing instruction uniquely different from many other kinds of teaching. We writing teachers impart to our students a body of knowledge, but we also teach habits of mind, choices for self-expression, strategic thinking, and self-awareness. When we do all of this well, our students are able to assess new situations and call upon their skills to literally create something new that fully meets expectations. We might reasonably view each act of writing as a uniquely new critical and creative challenge—or as writer and teacher Craig Vetter (2009) notes in wry fashion, each time we sit down to write is an opportunity to find out just how perceptive we aren’t.

Unfortunately, some students will graduate from high school having learned that writing is mostly the application of a limited range of procedures, templates, and formulas. These limited tools are inevitably insufficient to the needs of real writing situations, leaving students floundering and “struggling to put even basic ideas together,” as an employer might say. To adapt a familiar adage: Give a student a methodic formula for writing, and she might pass the test; but teach her to know herself as a writer, and she’ll write for life.

Although formulas and prescribed methods might allow our students to write with less difficulty by using tried-and-true formats, we run the risk of excising excitement, creation, and discovery from writing. Doing so contributes to a narrow notion of what it means to write. Our students grow as writers when we encourage them to stray from restrictive, basic formulas and, instead, to follow some imaginative bunny trails. Teaching writing in this way takes more effort and thinking for both our students and us teachers because we may be creating new forms and solutions for writing well.

Students who rely too much on a narrow method—the five-paragraph essay format is a fine example—for their writing restrict their thinking and communicative effectiveness. They may fail to adjust their writing for differing audiences and purposes, for example. Fluent writers, meanwhile, who are able to choose from a variety of possible methods and formats to meet a new writing expectation, may experience the thrill that comes from real learning, from creating an entirely new approach, solution, or response.

Some questions that deal further with writing, thinking, and creating are these:

- How can students best gain skill in assessing and responding to different writing situations successfully?
- How important is creative or original thinking for writing in everyday and professional situations?
- How can teachers prepare students to succeed on high-stakes writing exams without resorting to formulaic tactics?

Challenge 3: What to Do About Rigor

When a college professor who teaches first-year composition learns that you teach secondary school English, he says, “Do me a favor and get serious about prepping these kids for college. Enough with the storytelling. They need some rigor.” Anytime we propose that students benefit best from writing instruction grounded in personal relevance, sooner or later we’re dealing with critiques such as this one. Mountains of evidence indicate that engagement and motivation are key factors in getting students to become better writers. Whole forests of testimonials from teachers and students speak to personal, narrative writing as
a reliable and effective means for achieving this personal engagement. A small but steady stream of practical literature traces ways to build on a personal writing foundation to address a wide range of writing purposes. Yet, for some reason, this is not the landscape that the public and even some of our colleagues (who ought to know better) see when considering the place of the personal in writing instruction.

The experiences of individual writers hold an important place in writing instruction. Personal experiences give our student writers a basis for making sense of the world, for understanding the human condition, for connecting to new ideas, and experimenting with the potential of new forms of text to help them convey meaning. When we focus on students’ personal experiences, we are not being softheaded or abandoning rigor. Personal experience tempered by research, reflection, and analysis is an appropriate basis for any type of writing. With these ideas in mind, consider these questions:

- How important is story in modern culture?
- Why use personal writing with students at all? What are its benefits? Its drawbacks?
- Why do some people believe that “personal writing” is less important compared to other kinds of writing?
- How might facility (written fluency) with narrative, memoir, and similar kinds of writing serve students strategically?
- What evidence, examples, and explanation might help change the minds of those skeptical of the practical relevance of personal writing?

We teach within a culture that focuses on analytical, argumentative writing as the central academic expectation. During the last twenty-five years or so, expository writing in all of its forms—argument and persuasion being prominent—have dominated high school curricula. It’s the type of writing expected on high-stakes tests. It’s the writing that seems to represent our cultural currency of knowledge. With this shift to rigorous, academic writing, our students should be wildly successful in college writing classes and with whatever writing they will need for their careers. We don’t see a groundswell of public opinion that such is the case.

As you consider what it means to teach with rigor and the place of writing in our students’ futures, consider these questions:

- What kinds of writing skills are most important for college?
- What are the qualities of a well-written argument?
- Given that the genres of argument and persuasion already dominate school writing, what do parents, teachers, administrators, and the general public mean when they say schools need more rigor?

### Challenge 4: What to Do About High-Stakes Test Prep

In a faculty meeting, your principal admonishes, “Our scores on the state writing exam need to improve. We need everyone on the same page with the curriculum map, teaching the agreed-upon assignments in the established order.” For new and experienced teachers, dealing with the existence of state and district writing exams is simply part of the job. So is adapting to curriculum maps, department-level planning, test-prep expectations, committee-determined assignments, and other external interferences that chisel away at a teacher’s autonomy. Some schools support sustained collaboration and encourage teachers to have a professional voice about policy decisions. Others operate in a more top-down,
autocratic fashion and even shut down regular instruction in English and Language Arts classes in the weeks prior to high-stakes testing to create test-prep boot camps for students. When improvement mandates, school rankings, and even one’s job may rely on test scores, the pressure to conform to an approved, exam-prep curriculum may be overwhelming.

Creative teachers face clear challenges when the system seems skewed to encourage uniform, common-denominator approaches to teaching. We absolutely understand this pressure. At the same time, anything worth doing involves some kind of effort and risk. Think of it this way: If it were easy to be a creative teacher, everyone would be doing it. When boundaries, limitations, outside requirements, and rigid agendas have constricted your options, the real challenges begin. Succeeding within (and perhaps despite of) the limitations of a system is the real trick.

We offer suggestions throughout this book to help you deal with these circumstances. The questions below help guide our thinking:

- What options do teachers have when departmental or district curriculum expectations conflict with what they know about good teaching, good writing, and student learning? What do such options look like in practice?
- How do we teach writing authentically while still specifically preparing students for writing exams?
- To what extent are high-stakes writing exams accurate indicators of students’ writing abilities? How does our thinking about such exams affect our teaching?

**Challenge 5: What to Do About Technology**

When a friend introduces you to a technology guru who discovers that you teach English, she insists, “Print-based writing is simply not enough. Schools need to adapt to the new literacy demands of the twenty-first-century learner.” As we race into a future dominated by technology for business and social purposes, this call for change in our schools has become quite common.

Schools have generally been slow to adapt to recent technology changes, perhaps understandably. Technology is expensive, and most schools have had to make budgetary compromises. We see many classrooms in which students take turns on a couple of in-class computers and teachers share computer lab space. As Herrington, Hodgson, and Moran (2009) have pointed out, there are several contradictory factors involved in how administrators and policy makers view technology. Although a focus on providing “twenty-first-century learning” has led to technology-integration mandates in some school districts, administrators tend to shrink from the innate threats to control, discipline, and established order that Web-accessible technologies create. The result is a policy paradox: Teachers are expected to embrace technology but face restrictions about what they can do technologically with students.

If you are a teacher interested in integrating technology into your writing instruction, you likely exist in a zone of contradictions. Much research indicates that composing with the use of word-processing software helps students write more effectively and revise more often, but how do we teachers reconcile this knowledge of best practice with the shortage of computers and with testing that won’t allow students to write on computers? Or consider how the digitally networked complexities of modern communication demand dexterity, judiciousness, and ethical awareness that we could teach our students—if only doing so didn’t run afoul of restrictive school policies, including Internet filtering and prohibiting students’ cell phone use while at school.
Traditional notions of writing and literacy as being solely print-based and text-centered are inadequate for our tech-savvy students and for the technology-focused world into which they will graduate. Our students benefit from explorations with multimedia and multimodal forms of communication and from exploring the relative contextual merits of each. If conventional writing instruction is all students receive, we are doing them a disservice.

Consider for a moment the growing trend toward immediacy in written expression. IMs, texts, and Tweets may seem as transient as casual speech to young people, but these communication acts are as permanent in their own way as more traditional forms of writing. They also exist within contexts that have their own protocols and genre expectations. The ability for young people to “code-switch” effectively across media and context will be paramount to their future success.

At the same time, we want to be wary of the siren call of futurism when we’re dealing with technology, teaching, and writing. First and foremost, the public expects schools to produce students who write fluently and appropriately, an expectation we ignore at our peril.

Some questions that motivate our own thinking about technology and writing include the following:

- How are “digital literacies” defined, and how do they relate to conventional literacy?
- What abilities are most important for students to develop given present and future trends with tech-mediated communication?
- How can writing teachers make best use of technology within the narrow parameters permissible in schools?
- How important is the visual in writing instruction?

Teaching Writing Well: It’s Not So Easy

There’s no way to sugarcoat it. Teaching writing is challenging; it may be one of the toughest jobs a teacher faces. If you’re teaching in a middle school or a high school classroom, you know the depth of the challenges that large classes, students whose first language isn’t English, and excessive absences—as well as the challenges we discussed previously—present for teaching and learning anything. Too many teachers work in schools clogged with test-prep demands and follow-the-script teaching expectations. It’s not much of a surprise, then, if some teachers try to avoid writing instruction entirely while others adopt the latest “Teach Writing Quickly!” off-the-shelf product to make their lives a little easier.

Effective teaching of writing takes time: time for practice, time to share writing, time to complete pieces of writing, and time to respond to and evaluate all of that writing. Many teachers dread teaching writing precisely because it takes lots of time, in class and out. In addition, the kids may be tough to reach, the curriculum is demanding, and conventional class schedules are not particularly amenable to the teaching of writing. Your frustration is justified. You could certainly choose a formulaic, by-the-numbers path to any writing that you require students to do. No one is likely to blame you, call you on the carpet, or lament what might have been if the circumstances were different.

But wait. Is it possible that you’re missing the joy of seeing kids discover their own voices? Is it possible that you have coaching skills and writing talent that you haven’t
fully explored and developed? Maybe you could find some new strategies for getting your students going as writers and keeping them going. Maybe you could find some revision and editing strategies that students could and would use or transform your class into a community of writers. What if you gave this business of teaching writing a chance, calling upon your essential self to inform your teaching?

Becoming a successful teacher of writing is a journey. That’s where this book wants to take you. We want to help you avoid the mistakes that many teachers before you—including us—made as they tried and failed to teach writing well. Maybe it’s important for you to know that we are still working on our skills as writing coaches even as we author this text. After years of teaching writing and English, we still have doubts and uncertainties about our teaching abilities. These doubts drive us to experiment, read new research, alter our strategies, devise new materials, and learn as we teach. We continue to learn how to coach writing more effectively. If we cease to learn, we are committing personal and professional suicide. We work hard at being good teachers and writing coaches. More importantly, we invite you to join our journey and grow with us as a teacher of writing.

**Inside Out . . . and Vice Versa**

Almost every human child learns to speak without formal instruction. Some researchers such as Noam Chomsky suggest that we are hardwired for language. Learning to write and read—learning to be literate—requires training beyond what comes naturally, however. As we learn to write, we certainly tap into our innate, hardwired language-creating abilities. As we become more adept with language, we realize that we have word-choice and sentence-structure options; we have choices about tone and form and style. With this increased knowledge and ability comes the necessity to ponder and select among those options. Much research suggests that we think in a recursive manner: Our thinking cycles back on itself in metacognitive, incremental ways. Even as we write this book, for example, we reflect on our past and present teaching and writing experiences, try to bring them alive on the page, and extract beliefs and principles from them—and then we keep writing and reflecting some more. Writing has the potential to be permanen, to reside in a written text such as a book. It can resist the obliterating flow of time in ways that spoken words, words that we hear and then are gone, cannot. Writers create. We work a bit like sculptors, giving to shapeless clay or rough stone our steady and patient attention. Though revision and crafting, writing and rewriting, writers smooth the rough edges in our texts. We shape, sharpen, and strengthen our thinking. Form and meaning emerge in our writing just as works of art take shape under the sculptor’s tools and hands.

Each student has a story to tell and something to say. All kids have unique and worthwhile thoughts and language in their heads. They all, however reluctant, can be enticed to negotiate the difficult processes of bringing their inner language to the page or computer screen. Likewise, teachers can acquire the skills of an effective coach, nurturing students’ meaning-making processes.

To teach writing well, we don’t look someplace “out there” for rules, formulas, and mimicry. We begin, instead, by teaching students to attend to their inner language, to their individual sensations, perceptions, emotions, incipient understandings, observations, and perspectives. Writing, like all other acts of creation, develops from the inside out.
Although it’s important to teach writing from the inside out, much of how young people are educated—and so much of how they learn to see themselves in the world—involves taking the “outside in.” Even though we’re well into the twenty-first century, many school experiences are still based on very traditional, nineteenth-century assumptions about learning. You know how this looks. Teachers dispense information; students listen, take notes, and complete their homework assignments. At the end of the unit lurks a test, so students go through that old ritual of study and memorization. A passing score on the test demonstrates they’ve remembered enough to move forward, and the cycle begins again.

This scenario is based on a banking model of education in which sanctioned bits of knowledge are placed into students’ minds like deposits in a vault. The banking model is very much about getting the “outside in,” about putting the right information into kids’ brains. State and national standards spell out the knowledge and skills that students are expected to learn. Such knowledge is the currency they are paid for being malleable students. Audits in the form of standardized tests, end-of-course exams, and districts’ high-stakes testing ascertain that the implanted information sticks—more evidence of an “outside-in” mentality.

Unless a student lives life completely off the grid, dealing with the “outside in” is a daily, even hourly, challenge. American consumer culture targets teenagers as valuable customers, as consumers who can be swayed by a pervasive stream of visual messages to eat, wear, buy, play, watch, listen, say, do, and think as sociocorporate culture dictates. The digital, plugged-in, smart-gadget nature of contemporary youth culture sells cool to kids at the risk of tampering with an adolescent’s emerging sense of identity. The “outside” messages barrage the senses, sometimes altering or affecting a teen’s “inside” self-confidence.

There is a time and place for bringing “outside” pop culture influences “in,” but pop culture, by definition, is transient; it isn’t a way of life. The same principle applies to writing instruction. Young writers need to learn about themselves and discover who they are, what they think—maybe even that they think—before they have something authentic and interesting to say. When young writers are just starting out, they respond best to an approach that views them as thinking, expressive individuals possessed of a naturally creative spirit, not as test-taking automatons. They benefit from an approach that calls upon your essential self and best teaching practices to work with them from the inside out.

**Beliefs About Teaching Writing Well**

In short, teaching writing can be frustrating and challenging, but it can also be rewarding and a breath of fresh air in a rather stagnant educational context. A prerequisite for teaching writing well is a belief that writing can be taught. When you have tried but failed to see progress in your students’ writing abilities, it’s easy to succumb to the old thinking that writers really are born, not taught. Good writers have the writing gene; being able to write is in their DNA—or else it’s just missing. God created some people to be writers and others to be architects. Those creative accidents of the deity just show up in third-period class, all bright and articulate, and they whip out amazing pieces of writing without needing much from us as their teachers and writing coaches. That ideal is not reality for all of our students—just ask any teacher. Fortunately, there’s another way of thinking about students as writers.
Our fundamental belief throughout this book is that all students have unique thoughts and language in their heads, that they have personal experiences, stories, and ideas worth sharing. All students benefit from being encouraged to write, to bring the language in their heads onto the page or computer screen. We believe that we can be effective coaches of writing and help our students become better writers, no matter how reluctant they may be and no matter how many doubts they—and sometimes, we—might have.

We hold fast to the idea that writing is an intensely personal and uniquely human act. We see writing as inextricably bound to the individual experiences of feeling, perceiving, and thinking—bound to the processes by which language brings shape and import to what we feel, sense, and imagine. Writing emerges from an ongoing, never-finished, constantly refreshed, and always singular act of creation. Even with all we know about the human brain through decades of inquiry and study in the fields of human cognitive development, neurology, and linguistic theory—even with all that research and knowledge, exactly how language and thought happen and interrelate remain an amazing mystery. Each of us, and every healthy child in the world, is born with minds designed not just for language use but also for unique language creation. This fact, this ability, is absolutely remarkable, if not miraculous.

What Writers Need

Every teacher shapes an identity through negotiating (and renegotiating) these kinds of issues: What lies behind your teaching decisions? What determines the questions you ask, the assignments you design, the comments you make about student work, your criteria for grading, and your classroom design? What essential skills and abilities are you hoping to impart to your students? What, ideally, will they carry away from your class into their lives as thinking adults?

In the jargon of teacher preparation, working through such questions over and over on the micro and macro levels is called becoming a “reflective practitioner.” It’s a simple concept to understand that may be difficult to apply effectively. The basic idea is that good teachers never get too settled in their practice. They regularly question their assumptions and rationales, even going so far as to overhaul completely how they teach every few semesters or years. As we reassess our foundation for teaching and ask ourselves questions that may have uncomfortable answers, we are creating more work for ourselves. But it’s the nature of the work that matters. It’s definitely easier to pull out the same old worksheet or same old writing assignment year after year. What that doesn’t do is offer us intellectual challenges and opportunities to grow as teachers. Revising problematic assignments, designing new ones, experimenting with technologies, and risking failure are part of the process of becoming better teachers. Beware of the teacher—veteran or rookie—who is completely sure of each decision; he is either in a vegetative state or kidding himself. Revising and revamping our teaching lives is one way we stay intellectually alive; it’s one way we avoid burnout. If we won’t revise and rethink what we do, why should our students? We are reminded that when asked for words of wisdom at age eighty, the Renaissance artist Michelangelo reputedly responded with “I’m still learning.” His words might make an appropriate epigraph for our professional lives.

By pointing out some of the challenges that face teachers, we’ve attempted to pique your curiosity, encourage you to agree or disagree with us, but above all to reflect and come to
your own conclusions. We often rethink what we think, and we invite you to join us in this ongoing venture.

Nonetheless, our core beliefs about writing and writing instruction form the basis of this book and essential guidelines that motivate how we position ourselves as writing teachers.

**Belief 1: Writing Is Best Taught as a Creative, Social, and Collaborative Act**

This assertion might seem like a blunderingly obvious statement because writing doesn’t exist unless someone creates it. Teachers may agree with the notion of writing as an essential creative process, but if they run their classes as if students are producing the writing equivalent of widgets, then those notions don’t mean squat. Yes, our students benefit from learning a variety of common forms, conventions, and structures in writing. Of course, varying situations call for very specific kinds of writing, be it a company memo, a carefully worded apology, a sales pitch, or a college application essay. Some kinds of writing don’t exactly call for inspired invention; no one expects high poetry from a biology lab report. When we consistently forget about or ignore the kernel of creation that lies at the nucleus of each writing act, however, we lose something vital.

At any megagrocery store today you can buy shrink-wrapped items in the produce section labeled as “tomatoes.” Uniformly plump and red, these objects may indeed take the form of tomatoes, but they sure don’t taste like them. They don’t taste much like anything actually, and their mealy texture doesn’t add much to the eating experience. In the interests of mass production and convenience, these miracles of modern industry were grown far away, picked while still green, sorted by machines, and ripened with ethylene gas while en route to the store. We get something that looks authentic but isn’t in any important way.

Does a tomato that doesn’t taste like anything still count as a tomato? This is not just a rhetorical question or Buddhist koan. Real homegrown tomatoes may not always look as perfect as those fake doppelgängers at the Giant Food Mart. Each is a little different, with its own character and blemishes. Each takes time to develop and ripen. Almost without exception, however, backyard tomatoes have what matters most: flavor, juiciness, texture, and authenticity.

You see the point of our metaphor: When writing is taught in a way that excises the central creative element, we end up with the literary equivalent of industrial tomatoes, the sad triumph of appearance over substance.

Let’s look at another part of this belief: **Writing is best taught as a social act.** The cliché of the writer as solitary, Muse-inspired recluse gradually gave way in the 1970s and 1980s, partly due to constructivist learning theorists who began to insist that all learning was both personal and social. Those theorists pointed out that learners and writers needed to construct personal versions of the world around them, but then they also needed to submit those unique versions to peers for response, negotiation, and confirmation. Writing response groups became both a sound instrument for learning and growth and an acceptable element of composition pedagogy. To put it simply, real writing presumes the need—and the expectation—of active readers. Certainly some of what writers do may happen in private, but as an act of communication, writing invokes interaction with others.

The merit of this idea becomes quite clear when we consider the popularity of social networking. Here’s a new form of communication that simply didn’t exist a few years ago.
Once digital and mobile technology evolved to a certain point, however, social networking arose more or less spontaneously. Give people an outlet for expression and the possibility to interact with others and new communities will form, communities that are guided by shared interests. Traditional writing classrooms that isolate writers or move students through perfunctory “peer editing” as the extent of writing interaction might be rationalized with appeals to time shortages and overloaded curricula. That notion might be understandable, but be aware that such a model represents the opposite of how writing really happens in people’s lives, from cyberspace to the workplace.

Writing is best taught as a collaborative act. Writing classrooms may have social elements without being truly collaborative. Think about how peer review typically takes place. Students read one another’s work and make comments and suggestions, which is social, but then return to revising their own work alone. Although true collaboration may occur during writing response groups, we improve our students’ effectiveness when we teach them explicitly how to interact as readers and responders. It is through this process that the social becomes collaborative.

“Collaboration” as a goal sounds good; but, traditionally, schools are not institutions that promote collaboration. Schools are mechanisms for sorting, classifying, grading, and ranking students based on individual performance. Such a system encourages competition, not collaboration and cooperation. But school is not necessarily like life. If our students are to lead meaningful and rewarding lives, personally and professionally, they need to know how to participate, cooperate, contribute, and connect. A class built on collaborative instead of competitive principles doesn’t mean we throw out individual grades or personal responsibility, but it does require that we help our students grapple with a new ethic. Learning to manage and feel comfortable in more interactive structures takes time and some resolve, but the payoff in student growth is worth the pain of change.

**Belief 2: Coached Fluency Comes First**

**Fluency** is a term that we use frequently in this book as we talk about writing. Just as readers learn to be fluent with word recognition and sentence meaning, and just as speakers become fluent in a first and sometimes second language, effective writers also need to become fluent in their written expressions. Capturing thoughts and meanings from the brain and moving them onto the page or computer screen in ways that communicate information, experiences, or opinions—that is, acquiring written fluency—isn’t an instant skill for most people. Learning how to be fluent in one’s writing requires extensive practice. Written fluency also benefits from coaching by an experienced teacher-writer.

Putting fluency first requires that we allow our students to ease into new, unfamiliar forms. It means offering students many opportunities to read examples of the forms they will eventually write. It might mean deconstructing a form to understand its elements and how they work together within the piece. It means devoting a good deal of time to the early stages of writing a piece, namely idea finding, drafting, and experimenting. Oversimplified formulas don’t encourage experimentation; instead, they stress getting the form right. When developing writers are required to focus on forms, they learn to plug lifeless words and mundane ideas into the formula; they don’t learn to create unique expressions and to figure out the form in which the writing might work best.

In writing, all of us probably expect too much too soon. In contrast to the ideas of the late 1800s, we know now that children are not, developmentally, miniature adults; similarly,
we also now know that inexperienced writers don’t write as do adults, nor should they be expected to do so. Their thinking, sentence patterns, and vocabulary all need time and practice to develop. We shouldn’t expect young writers to have all of the elements of form mastered from the beginning.

We suggest that when you begin teaching writing to a new group of students, you declare a moratorium on concerns about rigidly defined forms and structures of writing. Emphasize fluency. Use expressive and reflective forms of writing that offer maximum opportunity for your students to get a feel for producing text without the pressure to meet all of the constraints of a well-defined form. Encourage them to write about themselves and their own experiences first and to value and interact with those pieces of writing. Developing writers need time to experiment with their ideas and words and the connections between the two. Practice in rendering the tangled web of their emotions and imaginations into written language will help writers learn to express their ideas clearly, precisely, and fluently. Let them write and let the forms emerge.

Proficiency in writing requires consistent practice. But just letting students write—mere unguided experimentation—isn’t the answer. If students are to grow as writers through practice, that practice must be coached. Someone who knows something about writing must interact with students before, during, and after the practice.

Novice teachers of writing may be dismayed and intimidated by poorly written student texts. Our first reaction to some of the really bad student papers we received was, “There’s something wrong with this paper, but I don’t know exactly what it is.” This can be an exasperating feeling when a student is waiting at your elbow for a response or when you have another hundred or so papers to read. Many teachers end up hiding behind correction marks like *Awk* and *Frag* and *Needs work*, focusing on easily identifiable surface issues.

It’s generally true that the best way to get good at diagnosing what’s working and what isn’t in student writing is to read a lot of student writing. Not much substitutes for this experience and familiarity, but there are some definite strategies that even new teachers might adopt from day one. One of the most effective approaches is learning to read and respond as a *reader*, not just as a teacher. As readers, we don’t have to be experts to interact with student work. We are free to base at least some of our reaction on what sounds right, strikes a chord, and makes sense. We might point to places in the piece of writing where we are confused or where we wonder if elaboration might be appropriate. We might ask questions that help to clarify the writer’s intention. Instead of filling papers with shorthand that only a fellow teacher readily understands, we suggest that you defer the urge to correct in favor of first interacting as a reader to a writer who happens to be your student.

Writing, sharing, and talking with our students about writing are more important than lectures, conventional rules about writing, and marking papers.

**Belief 3: In Writing, the Whole Is More Than the Sum of Its Parts**

Schools have always been pretty good at teaching parts and not so good at helping students see the big picture and create wholes. The deductive mind-set of working from part to whole, from word to sentence to paragraph, may sound logical: Begin with the word, next the sentence, then the paragraph; then, when students become *really good*, they get to write a whole five-paragraph essay. Master the parts, get those labels straight; memorize those transitional words to plug relentlessly into every paragraph. This mind-set equates writing to math: It’s neat and tidy, and it all adds up.
Except that it doesn’t.

Describing a person solely as a collection of a billion cells ordered into a few hundred bones and a couple dozen organs is preposterous. We are evidently more than the sum of our bodies’ parts; each of us is uniquely different from every other person in amazing ways. Similarly, in writing, the whole isn’t just a collection of parts. The crucial misstep lies in equating foundational knowledge—of letters, grammar, syntax, and punctuation—with operational knowledge, meaning how we put these tools to use. By fragmenting instruction and drilling on one part or one structure at a time, we kill motivation and destroy the very processes we’re trying to develop. If that’s not bad enough, we also end up with some pretty terrible writing as a result.

When we deal with writing, we are dealing with human acts of creation. Yes, writing is based on fundamental units. But what we each choose to do with these simple elements is what writing is all about. Here’s another metaphor: All decent architects understand the basic ingredients of construction. They understand the “rules” for how floors are laid, how brick walls are built, how roofs must be supported, and how homes and buildings are generally constructed. Does this mean they are locked into designing only one kind of structure? Architects are creative professionals, drawing upon their understandings of fundamentals to make something unique, not just to repeat what they’ve done before. Any architect forced to design the same limited kind of building again and again would likely find little satisfaction from her effort.

We’ve studied the components of good writing extensively and have worked at coaching writing for many years. We consider ourselves writers who have a sense of good writing when we see it. We also realize that writers fashion subjects in individual ways. We assist our student writers by designing occasions to rehearse their skills and techniques through a variety of writing experiences. We coach them by providing a third eye or ear. We avoid writing exercises taken out of an authentic context, and we make careful judgments about when and how to intervene in students’ writing processes.

But writers need to learn the basics first, some will say, and once they’ve done that, then they can get creative. This stance is laden with problems. At what point do we judge a student competent enough to begin using language creatively? How long must they spend in basic boot camp? What counts as “basic” and who gets to decide? And what’s the point if, by the time they learn the basics, our students see writing only as an onerous, joyless exercise to be suffered? Consider other creative acts. We hardly prevent toddlers from making up songs until they’ve mastered standards like “The Itsy Bitsy Spider,” nor do we discourage them from dancing unless it’s with perfect rhythm.

It’s unrealistic to expect students to drill on the parts of language or the parts of a composition for years in anticipation of some far-off future when they are allowed to begin using the parts to explore discourse options. We try to help young writers produce an authentic piece every time they write. There is technical knowledge to be learned: but writing is first enjoyed, read, and communicated. No approach to writing that forgets the joy of singing your own song will work with novice writers.

Belief 4: Writing Assessment Must Support Growth, and Growth Takes Time

Let’s be honest. We have assessed writing too early, too often, and in contexts that are too artificial to be informative about how real writing occurs. Some of our grading has been punitive or used shamelessly as crowd control. Many of our assessments tell us little about
the writing abilities our students do or don’t possess. Grading, assessment, and testing practices are, in many cases, an anathema to the teaching strategies that we know work best with developing writers; not every piece of writing needs to be completely finished and graded. We’ve heard many teachers lament that students pay only passing attention to the careful marking of their papers. The teachers that we know generally give little credence to students’ scores on mandated assessments of writing because they are most often one-shot samples of a student’s writing at a particular moment in time, not a sample of the student’s best work. Yet, many teachers we know continue to spend an inordinate amount of time alone with student papers, meticulously marking them. Add to these grievances the preparation and class time that teachers may be required to expend on mind-numbing, state-mandated test prep and testing, and we face a serious waste of energy and instructional time that could (and should) be spent on coaching and responding to student writing.

A curriculum that stresses authentic writing in a range of forms and for a variety of purposes and audiences leads to improved student performances in writing. Real language used in real ways for authentic purposes that matter to the writer promotes writing that matters, that others want to read and discuss, and that students value enough to work on and revise. Importantly, such authentic writing practice raises students’ scores on standardized and high-stakes tests. We don’t have to “drill and kill” our students. When writing and the written word live inside our classrooms as part of the intellectual conversation each day, writing and thinking flourish. When we teachers grade fewer papers and take seriously our responsibility to coach writing that is meaningful to students and that demonstrates effective strategies for improving content, appearance, and structures, students grow as effective writers.

Even in this age of instructional enlightenment, the chronicle of many children’s experiences with writing in school remains a fitful series of stops and starts. Too often, writing instruction is a patchwork of writing short stories this week, short essays next week, short critiques the week after that, and of delving into literature with no writing at all for the following six weeks. In other words, writing instruction too often consists of a sporadic pattern of quantum leaps and long silences. In too many schools and school districts, we continue to fail to provide enough consistent instruction and practice to reap the rewards of better writers and writings. Just because it’s in the curriculum guide doesn’t mean it gets taught. And just because it gets taught doesn’t mean it’s taught well.

For writing instruction to produce good writers, it must not only be well articulated in curriculum guides, textbooks, and inservice workshops, but it must also be practiced by a community of professional teachers who interact with each other to build proficiency over time.

Belief 5: It’s About Much More Than Just Writing

We’re hoping this final belief doesn’t come across as too clever or too cute. This book is obviously about writing and how to teach it well. Even so, whenever we start thinking about the underlying motivation of what we’re all doing, we can’t help but dwell on the much bigger picture.

Struggle and Accomplishment

When we teach writing authentically and personally, we fight against the prevailing idea that good writers are born with a talent for language and the rest of us are hamstrung by
genetic bad luck. We’ve met plenty of kids who’ve been taught the heartbreaking lesson that they are not (and can’t ever be) good writers. So, why should they bother? This misconception is usually tangled with some other troubling beliefs. Struggling writers often see their halting, disjointed efforts as evidence of a permanent inadequacy and thus a reason to give up. Fluent writers, meanwhile, see these very same initial efforts as provisional and expected, the first efforts in a much larger process. Fluent writers aren’t born that way. They’ve just had more experience in seeing writing projects to fruition through persistence, patience, and self-confidence.

This book is a case in point. If there are any phrases or passages that strike a reader as well written, stylish, or compelling within these pages, trust us, it’s not because the Muse delivered them, packaged in sparkling perfection. Almost all of our first attempts have to be wrestled onto the page, with clunky sentence structure mirroring our half-formed thoughts. Constant revision is our only secret; if you find areas that seem less elegant or astute, you can bet it’s because the polishing process of revision has been inadequately applied.

Part of our work, then, is helping students understand that the struggle, discomfort, and ambiguity so common to work-in-progress are absolutely normal, positive, and necessary. Withholding judgment and getting the whispering critic off our backs in these early stages is a major step forward. At the same time, students have to develop a personal ethic of effort. They need reliable habits of mind and self-discipline. Writing is serious work, with a lot of sweat and effort to go along with those occasional moments of inspiration. Caring enough to stick with it through the confusing and difficult process of creation is essential.

When we help students develop these mental attitudes toward written effort, we’re working on much larger life skills like setting realistic but challenging goals, delaying gratification, tolerating discomfort, overcoming failure, and practicing self-discipline. That’s a pretty valuable list of skills for success in the world. Every professional or personal endeavor out there worth doing—climbing a mountain, making the basketball team, building a career, or working on a relationship—requires dogged persistence and resilience in the face of adversity. The convenient narratives we often pass on to kids (“follow your dreams,” “you can do anything if you put your mind to it,” “winning isn’t everything; it’s the only thing”) tend to leave out the hard parts: the grinding work in the trenches, the inevitable obstacles and disappointments. As Tim Harford details in *Adapt: Why Success Always Starts with Failure* (2011), the key to accomplishment is how we learn to handle difficulty, frustration, and defeat. When a student stares down at the garbled paragraph she’s just written, what comes next is a microcosm of the test of life. Faced with this challenge, we want student writers to develop the fluency and confidence to roll up their sleeves for the hard work ahead. The alternative—shutting down the effort, and in the process, closing off an entire realm of human expression—is no alternative at all.

**Writers and Thinkers**

As teachers of writing, we are also teachers of thinking. We’ll even say that before you can be a good writing teacher, you have to be a teacher of thinking, first and foremost. This might seem like an odd or uncomfortable idea, but consider all the ways that thinking is woven into writing:

- Good writers use the act of writing to generate and help sort out their thinking.
- Good writers understand the importance of process in writing; in the words of Donald Murray, they see that most writing is actually rewriting.
• Good writers know themselves as writers; they are aware of their strengths and weaknesses.
• Good writers adopt a thinking pose: They wonder, ask why, consider reasons, explore alternatives, chase down stray thoughts, hypothesize, and make tentative attempts at developing ideas.
• Good writers consider the social, transactional nature of writing; they are able to see their work through the eyes of others and use this awareness to their advantage.

Can someone be a writer without also being a thinker? It’s possible, but the kind of writing produced may not be worth reading. We can live with the idea that our students may be making only modest progress in their writing, as long as they’re evolving as thinkers as well.

*And Finally . . .*

What do we lose if most young people leave school having decided that they have little to say through writing and if they find writing itself tedious and irrelevant? Whether the result of foregone personal conclusions (“I’m just not a writer”) or regressive educational policies that kill motivation and creativity, the corrosive effect on individual potential is the same. We don’t need to frame the problem in elaborate economic, political, social, or philosophical terms for the abundantly obvious to be clear: A nation of nonwriters with little confidence in sorting through their thoughts, experiences, and emotions is not a good thing.

Our beliefs about writing fight against this combination of alienation and apathy. We teach writing to help students see themselves as “voiced” individuals, as people who have the ability and confidence to convey their thinking on the page and on the screen, and who can move forward into adult lives rich with the potential that comes from a fluent and literate self-awareness. Now is no time to settle for an impoverished and narrow vision of writing instruction. Our students have something to say—about themselves and about the world in which they find themselves—and we need them to say it.

*Works Cited*


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