

Real-World Writing: Making Purpose and Audience Matter

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A number of years ago the J. Walter Thompson advertising agency published a full-page eye-catching advertisement in the *New York Times* in which they offered jobs to would-be copywriters. The ad was a dare: submit good work and you might be hired.

The Copywriter Test

Two of the least used words in the English language these days are: we're hiring. But at J. Walter Thompson, we are. So if you just know you could be a great advertising copywriter, here's your chance.

Dazzle us with your responses to the problems below, and we'll probably offer you a job as a junior copywriter at one of the best advertising agencies in the world.

The criteria for success could not have been clearer and more delightful (or more different from typical English-teacher rubrics):

One thing to keep in mind: A lot of people are going to take this test. . . . So if you want to get our attention and a job, you're going to have to show us fresh, fearless, more or less brilliant stuff.

The eight tasks in this high-profile performance assessment were challenging and thought-provoking. Here are a few:

- You are the songwriter for hitmaker Poppy Putrid. She's just had three recent No. 1 hits. All love songs. For her next hit, Poppy wants a song about moldy pizza, rancid butter, and flat beer. Her agent is convinced it should be another love song. Make it both.
- Write a "Dialogue in a Dark Alley." (Not more than 200 words.)

- The Transit Authority has denied a request by the city's taxi drivers to increase fares. The cabbies have gone on strike, and have parked their vehicles in the middle of intersections, bringing traffic to a halt. As a rookie reporter, it's your opportunity to shine. Write the banner headline and a story not to exceed 500 words.
- You are a writer for WalleSize Books. Describe the history of the United States in 100 words or less.
- Develop a script for a popular network television program that will convince the show's millions of viewers to each send in a dime. (You have 30 seconds to be convincing.)
- Design . . . two posters. One is for legislating strict gun-control laws. The other is in support of the NRA. (J. Walter Thompson A3)

"Fresh, fearless, more or less brilliant stuff"—if you want to get hired. That sums up the importance of authentic assessment in writing and the unwitting harm caused by typically vapid writing prompts and rubrics, and rigid use of the so-called writing process. The point of writing is to have something to say and to make a difference in saying it. Rarely, however, is *impact* the focus in writing instruction in English class. Rather, typical rubrics stress organization and mechanics; typical prompts are academic exercises of no genuine consequence; instruction typically makes the "process" formulaic rather than purposeful.

The task demands in the newspaper ad make a further point about authentic writing: say it *concisely*, have great *empathy* for your client/audience,

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and pay close attention to *context*. In other words: get serious, really serious, about Audience and Purpose.

That's what "authentic assessment" in the teaching of writing amounts to: ensure that students have to write for real audiences and purposes, not just the teacher in response to generic prompts.

Twenty years ago I wrote a widely cited paper on authentic assessment in which I proposed a rationale for authentic assessment and offered

a set of criteria by which we might distinguish authentic from inauthentic assignments (Wiggins).¹ Here is a summary of the criteria I proposed:

Authenticity in Assessment Demands

1. *Engaging and worthy tasks of importance*, in which students must use knowledge effectively and creatively to achieve a result. The tasks are either real-world or replicas and analogous to the kinds of tasks faced by professionals in the field, adult citizens, and/or consumers.
2. *Faithful representation of the contexts* facing workers in a field of study, or the real-life "tests" of adult life. The *options, constraints, and access to resources* are appropriate, not arbitrary. In particular, excessive secrecy and unrealistic limits on resources, methods, and time are minimized: the student has appropriate opportunity to clarify the task, plan, rethink, consult, rehearse, and revise.
3. *Nonroutine and multistage tasks—real problems*. Recall or "plugging in" is insufficient. The challenge requires thoughtful and methodical use of a *repertoire* of knowledge and skill—understanding and good judgment.
4. *Tasks that require the student to produce a quality product* and/or performance, for a real or realistic audience and purpose. The criteria should thus relate to achieving the appropriate effects—the "doing" of English or math well.
5. *Transparent or demystified criteria and standards*. Any realistic test presumes self-assessment and self-adjustment by the student. The standards and criteria by which the work will be assessed are thus fully knowable in advance. Questions and tasks may be discussed, clarified, and even appro-

priately modified through discussion with or formative feedback from one's "audience."

Clearly, these are not esoteric conditions. English teachers in good schools have typically had far less difficulty with these criteria than, say, math and history teachers when working over the decades in helping faculties design courses and units of study. But English teachers often have too narrow a sense of what constitutes a *realistic* challenge for causing a *genuine* effect in developing writing prompts and scoring rubrics.

Real writers are trying to make a difference, find their true audience, and cause some result in that readership. Yet academic writing is notoriously turgid, arguably because the impact of the prose is too often an afterthought, the writing a mere vehicle for offering up new knowledge. Yet, if we are to judge by the bulk of secondary school writing assignments—namely, assignments to find out if you read the book ("Was Oedipus fated to go blind?") or aimless prompts ("Write about a time when you were wrong.")—we would assume that students are writing for no purpose or person.

But the point is to open the mind or heart of a real audience—cause a fuss, achieve a feeling, start some thinking. In other words, what few young writers learn is that there are *consequences* for succeeding or failing as a real writer. You get the job for J. Walter Thompson or you don't. You make the reader laugh or cry or you don't, with consequences for the world, your ego, and your pocketbook.

There is thus an irony here: in the real world, Audience and Purpose matter in ways that school often shields writers from. "Purpose" in school is usually completely absent ("Here's your homework; this is the prompt") or artificial ("Write an editorial" but to no particular newspaper or with no personal motive or stake). There is no real *difference* to be caused, so there is no purpose. Is it any wonder, then, that so many school papers are—let us be brave and say it—*boring* and perfunctory? School writing doesn't *have* to be "fresh and fearless, and more or less brilliant." It just has to be on topic, handed in on time, and be four–five pages.

Thus, this is more our fault than we care to recognize. Since the only "effect" a student tends to worry about is the contrived one of the letter grade, and since most rubrics typically demand that the

writing be merely compliant (even if it is as boring as hell), we earn the predictable consequences: dreary and safe writing—the opposite of fresh and fearless. Students *know* they can get a decent grade for perfunctory work; they too often find out that risky rhetorical choices will be punished. We teachers thus rarely find the courage to face up to the fact that the writing *we* caused is so little fun to read. What was *our* purpose? Who is *our* audience?

Purpose: “Backward Design” from Expectations That Adult Writers Face

The overwhelming majority of Americans will not write academic papers for a living. The writing tasks that are required of us in the real world are actually more like the context-bound precise and focused tasks in the JWT ad—where audience and purpose really matter.

“Backward Design” of curriculum—our key aphorism in *Understanding by Design* (Wiggins and McTighe)—reminds us to design backward from the long-term desired accomplishments you seek. So, what writing accomplishment matters in the so-called real world? What actual demands face adult writers? Let us empirically consider the question: What will most people end up writing about in their lives? For what kinds of audiences and purposes do students need to be prepared?

I conducted an informal study among friends: In the last year, what writing did you do? What writing did you have to do? Here were some of the answers:

- A marketing plan and justification for a new pharmaceutical product
- A memo on the new health plan benefits so employees can make informed decisions
- Write-ups of medical case history to assist specialist doctors and the family in judging treatment options
- An employee manual to ensure everyone knows their rights and responsibilities
- A eulogy for a mother’s funeral
- Blog entries on the political campaign
- A letter to a credit card company, with documentation, on why a charge to an account was inaccurate

- A proposed scope of work for a district professional development plan, to be voted on by the school board
- A software user’s manual
- Legal briefs for pending trials
- A request to a college for a reconsideration of the financial aid award amount
- A proposal to a state education agency to fund a statewide project

What do these informal results tell us? Fiction writing is rare. Navel-gazing sharing of one’s feelings and beliefs is not particularly prized (except in blogs). School-like research papers with disembodied audiences and no bottom-line purposes are not the norm. Persuasive and informative writing for specific and real audiences are common. More generally, in real-world writing “audience” and “purpose” are not mere buzzwords; they are task-defining: the consequences of your writing matter for a specific audience in a specific situation.

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A recent report from the National Commission on Writing underscores the point:

- Close to 70% of responding corporations report that two-thirds or more of their salaried employees have some responsibility for writing, either explicit or implicit, in their position descriptions.
- More than half of all responding companies also report the following forms of communications as required “frequently” or “almost always”: technical reports (59%), formal reports (62%), and memos and correspondence (70%). (*Writing: A Ticket*)

I encourage all high school English departments to conduct a more formal and comprehensive survey of their alumni as to the writing challenges they face and the criteria—implicit or explicit—against which their adult writing is judged.

I was first clued in to the need for teachers of writing to challenge habits ten years ago when I

was working with an elementary school in Colorado on assessment reform. The school had a partnership with local businesses and professions. When the school faculty proposed a summative writing assessment, a fifth-grade version of a senior thesis, representatives from business and government immediately countered that this was simply not the type of writing that was important in their worlds. Academic writing, they complained, was typically far too verbose, dense, and unmoored from a real situation to be a useful model of real-world writing. What was far more important, they argued, was (as an example) the ability to write a clear two-page memo summarizing a discussion by one group for use by another group (National Commission on Writing, *Writing: A Powerful Message*).

Note how the audience/purpose frame influences the task: you are not writing to other experts or people who all theoretically know what you know and more (i.e., your teacher); you are writing to other divisions/people who can be counted on to *not* know what you know. You have to write empathetically, clearly, and concisely for them to act on your writing—if only to get a job in the first place: “Poorly written applications are likely to doom candidates’ chances for employment” (National Commission on Writing, *Writing: A Ticket*).

I can cast these concerns about Purpose in different words. Too often we teach Writing Skills and the Writing Process rather than helping students find something worth communicating. How can you write to make a difference if you have nothing to say? How can you be “fearless” if you lack the courage of any conviction? Why learn to write well if you have no desire to achieve any effect? Writing is “thinking on paper,” as the National Commission on Writing put it (*Writing and School Reform*).

It needn’t be this way. I know of a school district that requires *all* of its students to produce at least one A paper each year, revise it, and make it “publishable.” I know of another teacher who goes a step further: to pass the course, every student must get at least one paper published somewhere (hint: The free PennySaver at the market counts as a publication). I knew of a history teacher who gives out only two grades for oral presentations, where the audience included other staff members and family:

A or F. It was either fascinating or it wasn’t. (I have never heard more interesting—“fresh and fearless”—oral performances in *any* class, at any grade level.)

To Whom Am I Writing? Learning the Discipline of Understanding Audiences and Writing to Them

If there is a lesson to be learned about Audience from the JWT ad and the other examples I have cited, it is this: You cannot succeed as a writer without empathy. Leaving aside a journal or diary, you are rarely—never?—writing for yourself. So, then: Who is this “audience”? What are their expectations, needs, interests? Not your half-baked assumptions and projections, but the reality!

In my writing (which for over 20 years has been to educators) I get out of myself only with *much* effort. For the first few stabs and initial drafts, I am pretty much writing to myself or an amorphous reader. I am figuring out what it is I really think, and what, if anything, I have to say. But it isn’t until I start to reread the early drafts with *specific teachers in mind* that my writing starts to become more empathetic. Would Shelley make sense of this as a primary-grades teacher? Would Bill the algebra teacher know what in the world I was talking about—and care about the idea? Can fifth-grade teachers like Andrea and Jo use this, or will it seem too pointy-headed intellectual? Etc.

Alverno College has long been known as a pioneer in curriculum and assessment designed backwards from worthy tasks and accomplishments.² In addition to having built a competency-based curriculum framework, their assessments consistently focus students on audience and purpose. Here is a simple example from an early writing assignment in a chemistry class: “‘All aspirin is alike,’ says a friend. True or false? Explain to your non-chemistry-trained friend what you know as a chemist.”

Below is an excerpt from a rubric used college-wide at Alverno College, in which both the teacher and the writer score the work:

- a. REACHING AUDIENCE through establishing of *common context* (clarifying limits of situation and sources of thinking)
- b. REACHING AUDIENCE through *verbal expression* (showing relation between audience and writer through word choice, style and/or tone)

c. REACHING AUDIENCE through *appropriate conventions* (usage, spelling, punctuation, sentence structure, format, etc.)

d. REACHING AUDIENCE through *structure* (sense of intro./development/conclusion; focusing by main point made; connections)

e. REACHING AUDIENCE through *support/development*

f. REACHING AUDIENCE through *appropriate content*

g. SELF-ASSESSMENT [the accuracy of which counts for part of the grade!]

From here it is an easy jump to what all the best writers know. There is no such thing as a vast monolithic audience. You write to subgroups and individuals. You don't pitch the same detergent, venture-capital proposal, romance novel, or political vision to everyone. It is easy to make fun of focus groups in advertising and politics, but the concept is democratic and wise: there are many different "audiences" in our audience, and we need to figure out what they think, feel, expect, and need if we hope to reach one or more of them. Then, you realize—humbly, as I have—that you cannot possibly reach everyone in your world (in my case, the world of education). You usually have to find your most *simpatico* audience, to find your niche as a writer.

Reality Therapy in Writing: Beyond Egocentrism

So, let's reduce "authenticity" in writing instruction to two simple questions related to purpose and audience:

1. Is the student regularly required to achieve a real-world result, appropriate to context, as a consequence of writing, and *learn* from the result/feedback?
2. Is the student regularly required to write for specific and varied audiences, so that studying and coming to empathize with that audience is a part of the assignment?

Let us call this approach to writing instruction Writing Reality Therapy.

Reality therapy is the only way to escape the inherent egocentrism that makes *all* writers think that they said it all and said it well—when, in fact,

the paper contains only a third of their thoughts, a third of the thoughts is not clear, and the paper's impact is far less than the writer believes has been achieved. By introducing a real purpose, a real audience—hence, *consequences*—we get the *feedback* we desperately need to become good writers.

My favorite example of reality therapy in writing was told to me decades ago by Ted Sizer and came from his wife, Nancy. Her middle school students had to write precise instructions on how to make a peanut butter and jelly sandwich; Nancy would follow the directions to the letter in class—with predictably funny, unintended results.

Or, consider this great story told by Chip Heath and Dan Heath in *Made to Stick: Why Some Ideas Survive and Others Die* about screenwriter Nora Ephron's journalism teacher:

As students sat in front of their manual typewriters, Ephron's teacher announced the first assignment. They would write the lead of a newspaper story. The teacher reeled off the facts: "Kenneth L. Peters, the principal of Beverly Hills High School, announced today that the entire high school faculty will travel to Sacramento next Thursday for a colloquium in new teaching methods. Among the speakers will be anthropologist Margaret Mead . . ."

The budding journalists sat at their typewriters and pecked away at the first lead of their careers. According to Ephron, she and most of the other students produced leads that reordered the facts. . . . The teacher collected the leads and scanned them rapidly. Then he laid them aside and paused for a moment. Finally, he said, "The lead for the story is 'There will be no school on Thursday.'"

"It was a breathtaking moment," Ephron recalls. "In that instant I realized that journalism was not just about regurgitating the facts but about figuring out the point."(27)

The idea that all our learning is incomplete without tangible consequences from our attempts was noted by Thorndike almost a century ago. Good educational design, he argued, involves "the law of effect, which holds essentially that learning is enhanced when people see the effects from what they

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try” (qtd. in Haney 155). William James, even earlier, wrote that effective education requires that we “receive sensible news of our behavior and its results. We hear the words we have spoken, feel our own blow as we give it, or read in the bystander’s eyes the success or failure of our conduct. Now this return wave . . . pertains to the completeness of the whole experience” (41).

This is more than just the truism that writers need feedback. The best writing, like all learning, only happens through a constant and disciplined escape of self to explore the consequences. This draft horror story was meant to be scary; is it? This description was meant to be vivid enough for you to picture the person; can you? This résumé and cover letter was meant to get me a job. Would it impress a skeptical human resources person? Our boundless egocentrism demands that we learn how to distinguish effort from result.

Consider, for example, what this middle school teacher does to teach his charges that feedback in light of Purpose and Audience is key. He has developed an exquisite process for helping students get the feedback they need to escape egocentrism and to keep pondering purpose and audience. Long before he reads student drafts, the young writers have to engage in the following self-assessment and peer review process as part of clarifying purpose and audience:

1. Writer provides a draft of the paper to his or her peer review team. Attached to the draft is a purpose/audience statement: Here was my aim and here is who I was writing for (e.g., “A story meant to be scary, for my peers”).
2. Peer reviewers give feedback only in terms of Purpose and Audience: “Here is where it was most scary and interesting to me; here is where it wasn’t scary at all (and why).”
3. Peer reviewers mark with an x the places in the paper where they lost interest in reading and explain why.
4. Writer ponders the group’s comments, revises the paper, and submits it to the teacher. Attached is a statement of which feedback was

taken and why, which wasn’t and why not, and an overall self-assessment of the revised draft.

While this is a powerful process, note that peer review is still sometimes insufficient since it is a proxy for real feedback. So: Would anyone in a bookstore keep reading—as opposed to peers forced to read in class? Would the author be able to achieve similar and different purposes with a variety of real-world audiences, including (especially) indifferent or skeptical audiences?

The good news is that adolescents want to make a difference, and writing is one of the few ways to do so in the otherwise predictable place called school. When researchers for the National Commission on Writing interviewed high school students, they found

A key theme in what teens said motivated them to write was one of “relevance.” Teens said, in varying ways, that they wanted to be doing things that mattered socially, in their own lives, and had an impact. . . . They said, in effect, that if they were going to spend time and energy doing schoolwork, they wanted it to be something that related specifically to them and their interests. Teens also found it motivating when their writing could have broader impact through being publicly shared in class, in person, in print, or on the Internet. In fact, many teens commented on the positive push publishing or presenting to a formal audience provided for their writing. (Lenhart 57–58)

Every serious writer of any age—like every performing artist, athlete, doctor, or lawyer—ultimately learns more about performance from their effects because they are motivated to achieve an effect that matters.

By “serious” writer who “makes a difference,” I don’t mean humorless writing about weighty topics, by the way. A serious comedian struggles to craft the joke until it works; if people laugh, you have made a difference. A serious JWT copywriter hones the ridiculous ad with the talking frog or dancing raisin until it is fresh, fearless—and memorable. (Ask students to list the most memorable, fresh, and fearless ads, song lyrics, and lines from past student writings as a way to make these criteria more central.)

“Serious” means: I take purpose and audience seriously. “Serious” means committing yourself to

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never confusing effort with results; saying “But I worked so hard on this!” can never be the exclamation of a mature writer (even if we burn with frustration inside). It has to become more like what Winston Churchill reputedly said: Sometimes doing your best is not enough; sometimes you have to do what is necessary.

On the other hand, we must resist the temptation to be dismissive of ad copy, joke-telling, or letters to Mom as not serious enough. I am a graduate of St. John’s (the Great Books college) and I am in fact making a liberal argument: excellent writing, regardless of genre, liberates the writer as well as the reader; we are freed from the prison of conventional or half-assed thinking when we write successfully. The best writing—regardless of content—is *always* “fresh and fearless.” But such writing is only possible when we teach from the start that the Purpose is to touch real Audiences and create some alteration of the world—whether we are writing jokes or the great American novel. Otherwise, why write? It is far too difficult to reduce it to a mere chore.

All writing is deadening if, during the hard work, we know in the end it won’t matter much. In

this, Karl Marx was a wise English teacher: the point is not to interpret the world but to change it in some way. Once you realize you can do so through words, then a novice will appreciate—maybe even like?—this noble struggle.

A Postscript about Standardized Tests and College Admission

What the research about writing makes quite clear is that in their understandable fear of dire consequences from poor results on state tests, many teachers have reverted to safe, formulaic, and sadly counterproductive ways of teaching writing. It amounts to mindless test prep: “Since the state test uses writing prompts that have no real audience and purpose, I should mimic the format to best prepare my students for the test.”

This makes no sense when you think about it; please think about it. What you are saying (if you think or say this) is, I have to teach *worse* to raise test scores; I have to teach poor writing to improve their writing performance. This is an error—and a grave one.

The contrary is the case: The better you teach students to write, the more their scores will improve. That is, of course, how test validity works. You need only look at the samples of student writing released from state and national tests to see this. The papers that get the highest scores are more fun to read than the low-scoring ones, for all the reasons we have cited above. You need only look at the facts:

- A recent study by ACT revealed that about a third of high school students intending to enter higher education do not meet readiness benchmarks for college-level English composition courses (among certain ethnic groups, 50% or more of adolescents do not meet ACT benchmarks), making it unlikely that they will be able to learn effectively in the college setting. (Graham and Perin 9)
- Thirty-five percent of high school graduates in college and 38% of high school graduates in the workforce feel their writing does not meet expectations for quality. (Graham and Perin 9)
- Private companies spend an estimated \$3.1 billion annually on remediation, and state governments spend an estimated \$221 million annually. (National Commission on Writing, *Writing: A Ticket*)

Basic writing itself is not the issue; the problem is that most students cannot write with the skill expected of them today. The latest findings

from the National Assessment of Educational Progress (“the nation’s report card”) support those conclusions. These findings indicate that most students have mastered writing basics, but few are able to create precise, engaging, coherent prose. Four out of five students in grades 4, 8, and 12 are at or above the “basic” level of writing. However, only

about one-quarter at each grade level are at or above the “proficient” level. Even more telling, only 1 in 100 is thought to be “advanced.”

The NAEP data indicate that when asked to think on paper, most students produce rudimentary and


fairly run-of-the-mill prose. Writing at the basic level demonstrates only a limited grasp of the importance of extended or complex thought. The responses are acceptable in the fundamentals of form, content, and language. . . . On the whole, readers are able to understand what these students are trying to say. However, about three-quarters of students at all grade levels are unable to go very much beyond that. By grade 12, most students are producing relatively immature and unsophisticated writing. (National Commission on Writing, *Writing and School Reform* 55)

Consider what the College Board, maker of the SAT, has to say about good writing:

W4.1-1.6A Uses a variety of strategies (e.g., reading the draft aloud, seeking feedback from a reviewer, capturing and evaluating the organization of the draft in an outline or organizational map, reading the draft from the perspective of the intended audience) to evaluate whether the thesis claim is clear and substantive; whether the progression of ideas is coherent and smooth; whether claims and opinions are supported by evidence (i.e., reasons, examples, and facts); whether his or her opinions and/or use of sources displays bias; whether counterarguments are anticipated and addressed; whether audience “pressure points” (i.e., interests, values, opinions, background knowledge, norms, and attitudes) are appealed to; whether organizational patterns are clear and developed; and whether the conclusion is appropriate, persuasive, and compelling, in order to guide ongoing drafting, including identification of areas requiring further invention and research. (59)

Mindless “test prep” by English teachers is thus an ironic error. If we really understood testing—its Purpose and Audience—we would not make this mistake and kill off good writing in the process. An outstanding writing program will be reflected in test scores in the same way that we do well on the physical exam if we live fit, nutritious, healthy lives day in and day out. Mere safe use of formulae in writing by teachers locally is thus akin to practicing all year for the doctor’s annual physical exam instead of working all year to be healthy. The state test is, by design, an *audit* of the local program, to shift analogies. It uses simple and generic prompts and crude rubrics because that is all it can do logistically and financially, but that is all

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it needs to do to assure the public that good writing instruction and assessment is going on locally. You don't run your business for the auditors, you run it to achieve worthy purposes with your clients—your audience. 

Notes

1. See also Wiggins, Grant, *Educative Assessment: Designing Assessments to Inform and Improve Performance*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 1998.

2. See, for example, Grant, Gerald, *On Competence: A Critical Analysis of Competence-Based Reforms in Higher Education*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 1979; and Loacker, Georgine, ed., *Self Assessment at Alverno College*. Milwaukee: Alverno College, 2000.

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