WRITING ASSIGNMENTS THAT WORK

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In this paper I will consider five features of writing assignments that work. First, I will examine audiences, purposes, and topics built into assignments. Second, I will analyze writing assignments that help novice or unskilled writers define rhetorical problems. Third, I will mention building composing processes into writing assignments. Fourth, I will discuss the importance of considering the types of feedback or evaluation that our students need as they work through our writing assignments. Finally, I will note the importance of having assignments that follow some developmental sequence—some sequence that corresponds to the intellectual development of the child.

As I consider these five features of writing assignments that work, I will describe particular assignments: some for elementary students, some for secondary students, and some for college students. That does not mean that assignments for those three levels are mutually exclusive. There are many writing assignments that work at all three levels.

Let's turn to the first feature of writing assignments that work: audience, purpose, and topic. In a way, I have just mentioned three features, but those features cannot be separated very easily. They usually work as a set, an inseparable trio.

Consider for a moment the types of writing that people do most often in their leisure time. Do not include what people write for their jobs or for their teachers. Also do not include the writing that many of us English language arts teachers do in our leisure time. We, after all, have a special affection for writing, a special commitment to writing that many Americans do not seem to share. To project our interest in writing onto what President Johnson used to call "my fellow Americans" is to overgeneralize—something that even my students at the University of Arizona sometimes do.

When I ask people about the types of writing they do in their

leisure time, I usually get two responses. While some people tell me that they keep a journal or a diary, most tell me that they most often write personal letters to close friends and relatives.

Think about personal letters for a moment. Think about an audience consisting of close friends and relatives. Think about the transaction, the communication, that occurs between the writer and the reader. The writer knows that the reader is not a critic, is not a judge. The writer knows that the reader is interested in the writer and what the writer has to say. The writer also knows that he or she shares much background with the reader. For our students such readers are real readers—unlike their teachers who seem to be interested in correctness rather than communication.

Now think about topics included in those personal letters. Very few people, including English teachers, write about "school topics" in personal letters. How many of us in our personal letters to friends and relatives write about Watson and Crick's discovery of the structure of the DNA molecule? How many of us in our personal letters write about Henry V's defeat of the French at Agincourt on October 25, 1415? How many of us in our personal letters write about the theme of isolation or alienation in George Orwell's *1984*? How many of us in personal letters write about James Joyce or William Faulkner? I almost never write about these events and people, and I am very committed to writing.

When most people choose topics to include in personal letters, they write about topics that are familiar and interesting to themselves and to their readers. Plato comments on this practice in *Phaedrus*. Early in the book there is a scene in which Socrates listens to the young Phaedrus recite a speech on love—a speech delivered earlier by Lysias. As Phaedrus finishes the speech, Socrates says: ". . . it seemed that the author was saying the same thing two or three times, as though he weren't capable of saying a great deal on a single topic—or perhaps he wasn't especially interested in the matter" (13).

Or it is like the scene in *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland* in which Alice is trying hard to conduct a communicative transaction with the Caterpillar. Alice explains to the Caterpillar how difficult it is for her to discuss the change in size she has experienced—something that she doesn't know or understand very well.

The Caterpillar, who seems to possess some English teacher characteristics, says:

> "Explain yourself."
>
> "I can't explain *myself*, I'm afraid, Sir," said Alice, "because I'm not myself, you see."
>
> "I don't see," said the Caterpillar.
>
> "I'm afraid I ca'n't put it more clearly," Alice replied very politely, "for I ca'n't understand it myself, ..."
>
> When Alice in frustration, turns to leave, the Caterpillar yells, "Come back! I've something important to say!" (35-36)

We also have something important to say to our students about writing, but we need to stop treating them the way the Caterpillar treated Alice when he insisted that she talk about something that she could not understand.

Consider the purpose most people have when they write personal letters. The primary purpose is *not* to avoid errors, unfortunately the only purpose that many students see in our courses. No. Most of us have a common purpose when we write letters. I write to my parents, my brothers, my sister, and my close friends in Wisconsin and Minnesota to let them know what I'm doing, to let them know that I'm okay. I inform them; I reassure them; I try to amuse them. At times, though, I have other purposes. When I write to friends and relatives on the tundra of Minnesota and Wisconsin in December and January, I tell them about Tucson's gorgeous weather and the many sights to see in Arizona—especially in warm and sunny southern Arizona. Such letters often have a persuasive quality to them. And I have been effective with this persuasive writing. I can show you lots of grocery bills to prove that.

I'm not saying that all of our students should write personal letters all the time in all of our courses. Such an assertion would be absurd. For many of our students, though, personal letter writing is an appropriate beginning place. What I am saying is that our writing assignments need to reflect some of the features of personal letters. Our writing assignments need to allow students to write to familiar—or at least friendly—audiences who want, who expect, writing to constitute a communicative transaction. Our writing assignments also need to allow students to write about topics with which they are familiar and in which they have some interest. (It is possible, by the way, to help students become interested in deoxyribonucleic acid, in the Battle of Agincourt, in Winston Smith, and in Joyce, Shakespeare, and Faulkner. Some students will even bring

such interests to our classes.) Above all, our writing assignments must not have as a primary goal the avoidance of errors.

Let me share with you some assignments I have seen in the many classrooms that I have visited in Arizona. The following assignments make efforts to create real audiences, real topics, real purposes.

In Marana, Arizona, teachers at Butterfield Elementary School ask sixth graders to write to fifth graders to tell them what fifth graders need to do to be ready for sixth grade. In the school, fifth graders write to fourth graders; fourth graders write to third graders; and so on. Those students are willing writers because they are writing to an interested audience about a familiar and interesting topic for the purpose of sharing important and real information.

In Ganado, Arizona, at Ganado Elementary School I have seen classrooms filled with life-sized figures of Superman, Spiderman, Wonder Woman, Batman, and other superheroes. Children in those classrooms write letters to their favorite heroes. Their saintly teachers, in turn, take on the personae of those superheroes—a feat that is easy for teachers—and write letters back to these students. Think about what those students have been able to do with writing in this situation. Think about what power writing has given them.

Also at Ganado Elementary School, children are asked to write complaints about problems in the school: problems with bullies, broken water fountains, and the like. Sig Boloz, the principal, holds a conference with the author of every one of those complaints. Every written complaint results in some sort of resolution to a problem. Think about the power that children achieve through that writing.

There are two very helpful books published jointly by the National Council of Teachers of English and the United States Postal Service. One, entitled *All About Letters*, is designed for grades six through twelve. The other, *P.S. Write Soon*, is designed for grades four through eight. The two books provide students with information about writing letters of all types. The best part about the books, though, is that they provide addresses of organizations that will forward letters to famous political leaders, to pen pals in foreign countries, to film and television stars, to famous musicians, and even to Dear Abby.

In the fall of 1983 in Freshman Composition 101, the first submitted batch of papers included three outstanding ones. The first explicated the conflicting Soviet and American accounts of the downing of the South Korean jetliner. The student who wrote this paper

chose a more-or-less "school topic" but not because I had directed her to do so. She had become interested in the current event before I asked the class to compare and/or contrast two phenomena. What she did do in writing about this topic was to follow my advice to "write about something that you know and care about." Her paper interested me because it had first interested her.

The second paper, written by a cross country runner, considered the relative qualities of Nike Eagle and Nike Elite running shoes. The paper went through some major revisions (which I will describe later) before becoming an excellent one, but the student's commitment to the topic was a crucial factor in its evolution.

The third paper (which I will also examine in more detail later in this paper) first contrasted the *Star Wars* character Han Solo with Beowulf. In later drafts of the papers, the student contrasted Han Solo with the *Happy Days* character The Fonze.

Let me now turn to the second feature of writing assignments that work. From my teaching, research, and reading of investigations conducted by people like Linda Flower and John Hayes at Carnegie-Mellon University, it seems important that writing assignments help students to define rhetorical problems (21-32). That is, assignments need to make it clear to novice writers—at least some of the time—to whom they are writing and for what purpose. I have already said a little about that in describing some writing assignments from Butterfield and Ganado elementary schools, but let me add a little more about defining rhetorical problems.

Most novice writers have difficulty solving rhetorical problems because they cannot define those problems in the first place. They look at the blank sheets of paper in front of them, unable to think about what it is they are to do. All the parts of rhetorical problems—concerns about audience, purpose, persona, topic, deadlines, and surface features of text—seem to have gone through a food processor to form a gob of muck stuck in students' brains. Many students never are able to recognize any ingredient in that muck, and those who are too often recognize only surface features (spelling, punctuation, sentence structure) as the rhetorical problems. It then becomes difficult, if not impossible, to use writing to engage in a communicative transaction. Solving the rhetorical problem becomes, at best, a matter of avoiding errors.

Perhaps I should now turn to an example of an assignment that helps students define and subsequently solve rhetorical problems.

In the fall of 1983, a social studies teacher at Sunnyside High School in Tucson asked her students to write letters to Barry Goldwater, advising him how to vote on the upcoming Senate resolution on American intervention in Nicaragua. She sat at her desk and watched students sit at *their* desks—doing nothing. When she asked them what was wrong, there was silence. When she then asked them if they had any questions, they had several: "Who is Barry Goldwater?" "Where is Nicaragua?" "What is intervention?"

She spent the rest of that class period talking about the answers to these three questions. By the end of class, students were not only ready to write but also ready to discuss with their parents our country's involvement in Nicaragua. The next day some students came to class with letters already written. Incidentally, Barry Goldwater answered those letters.

The third feature of effective writing assignments—related to defining a rhetorical problem—is that assignments need to have composing process built into them. Process allows novice writers—*especially novice writers*—to focus on individual parts of rhetorical problems. It allows them to think about audience, purpose, topic, development, logic, and even surface features like spelling, punctuation, sentence structure, and word choice in some orderly fashion: "For everything there is a season, and a time for every matter . . ." (Ecclesiastes 3:1). I will simply mention the importance of process since process has received so much press in the last few years.

The fourth feature, which is related to defining rhetorical problems and attending to process, is that students must receive the right kind of feedback at the right time. Early on, it must be like Wonderbread; that is, it must help build compositions twelve ways; it must be formative. That feedback must also be detailed enough to help students understand how they can go about the task of writing. It must also deal with communication.

Earlier I noted that Linda Flower and John Hayes have outlined the difficulties facing novice writers attempting to define rhetorical problems. Even after successfully defining those problems, though, many novice writers freeze at the thought of developing solutions because they believe that they must attend to all parts of the problem (audience, purpose, content, persona, meaning, surface features) all at once. What results is cognitive overload, a short circuit in thinking. Writing, then, for these students becomes an unmanageable feat, and their initial panic soon evolves into despair.

To alleviate or eliminate cognitive overload in our novice stu-

dent writers, our feedback must help them focus separately on individual parts of rhetorical problems. They should understand that they do not need to generate and organize and develop and refine ideas while simultaneously editing for perfect spelling, punctuation, and sentence structure. That is, our feedback must help them understand that there is a rational and humane reason for refraining from editing until there are enough well organized and well developed ideas to warrant editing. As we evaluate (not grade or correct) their thinking and writing, we need to make the purpose of evaluation correspond rationally and humanely to time and season.

To treat the role of evaluation more concretely, I will now return to the two student papers I mentioned earlier. When I first read the paper about Nike Elite and Nike Eagle running shoes, I noticed a variety of unsolved rhetorical problems. The major weakness of the paper was that it was written for other cross country runners, people who know shoes and who understand injuries. Although the student had sprinkled thorughout the paper terms regarding running shoes and injuries, he had not defined or illustrated them. In a subsequent conference with the student, I asked him to explain some of the terms. Each time he provided an explanation that I understood, I said, "Maybe you should include that in your paper to help people like me—people who have some interest in running but little knowledge about it. You need to help those of us who have not benefitted from the coaching and training that you have received."

The paper also suffered from a lack of purpose—mainly because the student had not thought about one. When I asked him the simple question "Why would anyone want or need to read a paper like this?," he knew immediately that he needed to view his paper as a buying guide for novice runners. Once he recognized his purpose, he was able to use it to reshape his ideas. The result was a good piece of writing— one that appeared in the University of Arizona's *A Student's Guide to Freshman Composition* as an example of a well revised essay.

The other paper, the one dealing with Han Solo and Beowulf, also had a major weakness. While the student was interested in and knowledgeable about Han Solo, his commitment to Beowulf resembled the commitment that young Phaedrus exhibited when he recited the speech by Lysias. When I asked the student why he had contrasted these two particular characters, it became obvious that Han Solo was one of his favorite characters; his eyes almost

sparkled as he talked about the space hero. The student went on to admit, though, that he had chosen the second character, Beowulf, because I, an English professor, might like that.

I asked the writer about some of his other favorite characters. Among those that he listed was The Fonze from *Happy Days*. As we talked about The Fonze, the student began to notice that The Fonze and Han Solo share a number of characteristics—enough to allow an adequate treatment of the two. The student's interest in the two heroes allowed a good treatment. I enjoyed reading the revised paper.

Notice that in both conferences with students I did not attend to editorial matters; they came much later. The conference discussions focused on the development of ideas. Once the two students had adequately developed their ideas (not mine), they were able to attend to other matters, such as organization and eventually spelling, punctuation, and syntax.

As we consider the feedback or evaluation that we offer our students, we need to keep in mind what a special education teacher told me once when I asked her how she measured her success with special education students. She told me that she was satisfied each time a student became more independent, less dependent on her, in solving problems that most people solve regularly. Our students must also eventually become independent thinkers and writers and also readers of their own writing. To begin this process of making students independent as writers, we must as soon as possible train students to carry on the types of conversations I had with the young man who wrote about Han Solo and The Fonze.

Lest you think that working toward this independence is akin to climbing Mount Everest, let me share with you some more stories that I have seen and heard as I have visited Arizona's schools. The examples I will provide come from elementary schools.

Mary Kitagawa, a teacher at Richey Elementary School in Tucson, demonstrates the importance of using peer feedback to guide revision. Her fourth and fifth graders draw pictures, which they subsequently describe in writing. Each student exchanges the description with a peer, who is asked to recreate the original drawing from the written description. The two students compare versions of the drawing. Where discrepancies exist, the writer and the reader discuss reasons for those differences. When they agree that a particular discrepancy is due to an inaccurate or inadequate portion of the

written description, the author goes back to the writing to revise and/or edit. Kitagawa's students become very aware of the usefulness of revising.

Jackie Cohen, a fourth grade teacher at Tucson Country Day School, uses a similar strategy in her science units to encourage students to observe, write, and revise carefully. In her exercise, she places five or six rocks (or leaves, pine cones, moths, etc.) on a table and asks each student to describe each of the rocks thoroughly enough so that another student in the class can match each description with a particular rock. When another student cannot make the matches, the writer must revise—again using feedback from a peer.

The fifth feature of writing assignments that work is that they follow some developmental sequence. To my knowledge, the most well thought-out sequence is the one developed by James Moffett—first in his book *Teaching the Universe of Discourse* and more recently in his book *Active Voice*.

Moffett's sequence is based on the cognitive development theory of the Swiss psychologist Jean Piaget, who demonstrated that as the child develops intellectually, he or she is able to "decenter." That is, the child can think about other perspectives than the one he or she holds at this place and at this time. The child develops the ability to think and talk and write about things more distant from himself/herself in time and space. The child gradually becomes able to think and talk and write about more abstract concepts, those less closely tied to concrete reality. The child also becomes more able to address less familiar audiences—audiences with experiences that differ from his or her own.

Writing assignments can follow this sequence of intellectual development, and those developed by Moffett do so quite well. His two books are musts for any serious teacher of writing.

Just as some ideas presented earlier in this article can be traced back to ancient Greece and Rome, so too is the case with Moffett's sequence. Donna Haisty has recently noted that Moffett's assignments share many developmental features with the *progymnasmata* of the two classical cultures. As Corbett notes, versions of *Progymnasmata* by both Hermogenes and Aphthonius were used in Greece and Rome, but both Roman and Greek editions were most popular among European schoolmasters of the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries (602). (*Is* there anything new under the sun?)

Attention to the five features of writing assignments that I have

considered here will not guarantee that all students will write well in or out of our classes. A lack of attention to these features, however, will almost guarantee that many students will not write well.

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