Lights, Camera, Write: How Scene Writing Can Help Students Write in Multiple Genres

This article argues that the goal of an educator is to help students realize they can be effective writers by giving them the ability to demonstrate their skills. Scene writing can make writing seem less like a chore and more like an opportunity to express ideas.

A New Perspective on Writing

Scene Description: An English 9 classroom. It’s the start of last period of the day and students are eager to go home. Desks are grouped in pods of four; a variation on the rows of eight that students are used to seeing.

Character List:
Mr. Owens, a teacher
Students:
- Samuel
- Jenny
- Rafi
- Various others

The bell rings, signifying the start of the period. Students are unsure of where to sit.

MR. OWENS: (projecting his voice) All right, class! I know the seats are a little funky today but for right now, take a seat wherever.

RAFI: Why are the seats like this, Mr. O?

MO: You’ll find out soon enough, Rafi. (He waits as all students find a place to settle.) OK, guys. As you know you have your test next week on Romeo and Juliet. (The entire class groans.) Today we’re going to prepare for the writing portion of the test.

JENNY: Are we going to have to write an essay?

MO: Well . . . eventually.

(The entire class groans again.)

SAMUEL: (anxiously) What about?

MO: You’re going to have to address the question “Are Romeo and Juliet truly in love?” by giving your opinion and supporting it with evidence from the play.

S: (putting his head down on the desk) Oh, man, I’m going to fail! I don’t understand anything in that play.

MO: Well, hopefully that’s what today will help with. In the groups you’re sitting in, I’m going to have you write your own version of the Balcony Scene.

R: (surprised) What? I can’t write like no Shakespeare!

MO: I’m not asking you to. I want you all to write it how people today would speak. I’m also giving you the freedom to place the characters in a more modern setting, so that an audience of today might better respond to it.

J: (excitedly) So, you mean we can make Romeo a football player and Juliet a cheerleader?

MO: Absolutely. You can even change their names around if you wish. All that I require is that you keep the content of the scene the same. That means you can’t have Romeo suddenly change his mind and decide to leave Juliet’s orchard to hang out with his friends.

S: (more at ease) Well, that doesn’t sound too bad. I thought we would have to write paragraphs or something.

MO: Nope, just the scene. But before your groups start to write your scenes, think about where your scene is taking place, what the characters’ motivations might be for what they do or say, and what the overall meaning and significance behind their
dialogue would be. This will make your scene stronger. The scene will also need to include the elements of drama we have been studying, like scene description, character list, dialogue, monologue, and stage direction.

The assignment that “Mr. Owens” describes for his English 9 class above is one that I have used for years in preparation for an in-class essay my students would be writing at the conclusion of act 2 of Romeo and Juliet. Time and time again, I have found it to be the most effective way for students to not only comprehend the difficult language and ideas presented in the play but also to demonstrate their understanding through writing in multiple genres. This process begins with students creating their own scene. While the scene may not be completely original because they are working from Shakespeare’s content, they are given enough creative license (changing setting, character names, and dialogue) to still have ownership over what they eventually write. The fact that students are working in this model makes the writing task less daunting because they are drawing content from group discussion and co-constructing new text based on their knowledge of the original text, in which they portray characters, conflicts, and other important story elements (Bedard and Fuhrken). As students write scenes that include both dialogue and action, they gain a deeper understanding of the text by examining character motivation. For example, when students take into account Juliet’s famous “a rose by any other name would smell as sweet” line, they are forced to examine the metaphor and analogous aspects of the line. They might consider why Juliet would be saying this before placing it into the context of their own scenes, thus deepening their understanding of Shakespeare's original text. This understanding then is reflected in their own scenes. Once students have the ability to demonstrate this comprehension in one form of writing, it can translate into other genres. Based on what they have presented in their versions of the scene and their deeper understanding of the text they are writing about, students can then feel more confident writing the argumentative essay that Mr. Owens references as their assessment. They can use what they have learned from writing the scene to form their opinion, and use specific evidence that they are now more familiar with, to support it. This is the benefit scene writing can provide.

Scene Writing Makes Writing Less Intimidating

Every teacher is familiar with the reaction of dread from students that inevitably accompanies writing assignments. Writing formal essays is often considered students’ least favorite activity in English classes. If the goal is to have students demonstrate understanding through their writing, why must it necessarily be in a standard essay form? If writing can be presented in a way that students might already find enjoyable, it can make the act of writing more accessible and more effective. As stated in “New Literacies: Scriptwriting,” “Our students are enamored of watching television and movies. They see video and film all of the time. But how many of them realize that their favorite TV show or movie originated as words on a page?” (Baker). If writing is presented in such a way that students can make the connection to what they already enjoy in the media, it becomes less of a task for them. They start to see the writing as a fun exercise rather than an assignment they are required to complete.

The structure of scene writing also takes away some of the intimidation students might feel when approaching other types of formal writing tasks. The majority of scenes are broken up by character dialogue and stage direction. Aesthetically, this not only makes scenes easier to read for students rather than paragraphs of text, but it can help make writing easier as well. As seen in the scenario that started this article, Samuel got extremely anxious at the mere mention of writing an essay. After Mr. Owens explained what he was expecting out of the students in their scenes, Samuel’s trepidation softened. This is not uncommon to what I have seen with my students. Once presented with the idea of writing shorter, more succinct sentences as one would see in scene writing, rather than longer paragraphs as an essay might have, the task in their
When teaching this concept and demonstrating the difference between implicit and explicit character-
ization, I ask my students to consider the example in Figure 1.

While both methods of describing Esperanza are effective in helping the reader learn about the character, the implicit example asks the reader to make inferences about her based on what she says, how she says it, and what she does. This is made a lot clearer to students when presented with scene writing, because of the clear distinction between dialogue and stage direction. Students can then take what they recognize in the scene as implicit characterization, and use that technique in their own narrative writing.

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A common obstacle of teachers when teaching argumentative writing is getting students to consider opposing points of view.
Suggestions are provided for students about what they should be including in the dialogue they create between the two characters. The content of this exchange is meant to lead students toward their claim of whether or not Amir is a monster or hero based on his actions in the novel, especially in relationship to the character of Hassan. The direct quote part of the assignment is included to prepare students for using evidence from the text to support their eventual claim. What the scene writing aspect helps provide is to allow students to see things and events of the story from the unique perspective of the characters. Writing dialogue as if they were these characters, especially in a format of exchange, helps them understand the motivations and emotions behind these characters. Students then use what they have discovered from the writing to inform their eventual thesis. This is an outcome that most generic outline formats for argumentative writing cannot produce.

Conclusion

Newly formed writing standards emphasize the importance of assessing students’ ability to write argumentatively, narratively, and informatively, but there is hardly any mention of writing creatively. Scene writing is a creative prewriting tool that can lead toward successful and meaningful writing in other genres. The goal of any writing teacher is to help their students realize they can be effective writers, by giving them the ability to demonstrate their skill. Therefore, any method used to make writing seem less like a task for students, and more like an opportunity to express ideas, would be highly beneficial for teachers to use in instruction. Scene writing takes the intimidation factor away in that it allows students to break down writing into basic and easily accessible parts. Scene writing can serve as a model for strong, descriptive narrative writing because of its presentation of key narrative writing elements. Scene writing can also function as the beginning steps in argumentative writing in that it allows students to take multiple perspectives on a topic or idea and express those ideas with direct support from the text. Most importantly, however, is the idea that most students imagine what two of the major characters would discuss if given the chance to meet after the events of the novel take place. The prompt for the assignment is as follows:

For this assignment, you are to suppose Amir and Hassan have a final meeting before Hassan’s death in Afghanistan. Create a scene (10–15 lines of dialogue from EACH character) about what you think the two would talk about after not having seen each other for so many years. Do you think Amir would admit to witnessing Hassan’s rape? What would Hassan’s reaction to this be? What about their past together would they discuss? What in their adult lives would they want to talk about? What are their plans for the future? You can write the majority of the dialogue in your own words, but at least one line from each character should be a DIRECT QUOTE from the novel (include pg. #).
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don’t see scene writing as writing at all, but rather as a fun activity that allows their creativity to shine. If Mr. Owens can continue to “fool” his students into thinking that scene writing is not actual writing, while at the same time teaching his students the fundamentals of what it takes to be an effective writer who thoroughly communicates ideas in an engaging way, he has done his job as a writing instructor.

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Works Cited

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Lisa Storm Fink, RWT
READWRITETHINK CONNECTION
This lesson invites students to use their understanding of modern experiences with digital technologies to make active meaning of an older text, such as Shakespeare’s Romeo and Juliet, by asking students to create their own modern interpretation of specific events from the drama. Students first brainstorm a list of technologies they use, and then imagine what would happen if Romeo and Juliet were set in a modern-day world and that technology was available to the characters. Students work in small groups to create technology profiles for characters in the play and then discuss their ideas with the class. Next, students select from a variety of projects in which they reimagine a scene from the play with modern technology incorporated. Finally, students share their projects with the class and discuss why they made the choices of scene and technology that they did. http://bit.ly/1M5wyi5