

What's Next in Writing Must Be What Was in Writing

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The more experienced the writer, the more likely they are to articulate the difficulties of the writing. Ernest Hemingway said, "We are all apprentices in a craft where no one ever becomes a master."

—Warner, 2018, p. 12

To begin to turn student writers into writing-related problem solvers we need to substitute new values for the old. Rather than standardization, efficiency, and proficiency, we should be concerned with choice, curiosity, risk, and the building of a critical sensibility.

—p. 159

“Writing next?” Where does writing go from here? It is not about finding something new. It is not about new technologies, new formats, new rubrics. In our classrooms we have to go **back** to writing for real reasons for a real audience. We have to give kids choices about what they write, why they write, and how they write. It is not about using rubrics and formats to standardize writing and falsely claiming kids have “mastered” something that even the masters (Stephen King, Toni Morrison, Dan Brown, Naomi Shihab Nye, Tom Clancy, Khalid Hosseini, among many more) would never say they have mastered. Every piece of writing is another problem to solve.

This article is especially problematic for me to write. I don’t want to offend teachers. I know how hard they work. But I want those who depend on rubrics . . . and programs . . . and kits . . . and scripts . . . to stop using

them. They do not make kids better writers. I want teachers to stop relying on rubrics and formats (like the five-paragraph essay) that kids understand as nothing more than filling in the blank to fulfill an assignment that is meaningless to them. When the writing is for the teacher and not for the writer, when the writing is done to complete any kind of checklist or when the writing is done to meet a standard within a set of competencies, it will never be the best writing the writer is capable of crafting.

In too many schools we have taught students how to be unsuccessful at writing and to truly dislike it in the process, and that’s the problem. The process. We have convinced kids that writing is simply the product of a set of rubrics and formats that, if carefully followed, will help them succeed at meeting the competencies and the standards and fit the format for achieving good scores on prompts and tests.

Over the last few years many students (and parents) have asked me, “What’s the rubric for an A?” And now that we have gone to standards-based competency “grading,” (I am continually told by administrators and some colleagues the B for Beginning or the P for Progressing or the M for Meets or the E for Exemplary are not grades), “What are the rubrics to master the standard?” In writing, this does not work.

We have not taught kids that writing is hard work. We have not taught kids that no one “masters” any piece of writing with a set of rubrics and formats. We have not taught kids that writing is a recursive process of always trying to solve problems.

If students believe they have mastered the standard, all they have done is fill in a blank no less ominous than a standardized test. It’s not their fault they can’t write. We have

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taught them how to be successful at bad writing. The five-paragraph essay is a perfect example of bad writing. State a thesis that is a declarative sentence (instead of a compelling lead that hooks a reader and gives a direction to the writing, often a story or anecdote that pulls a reader in), give three examples that use the “proper” transitional words (What makes three the magic number? Maybe there are two extraordinary-enough reasons, or maybe five?), and repeat the thesis in the end with the words *in conclusion* (instead of offering the reader a poignant comment that leaves them thinking or feeling or knowing something they might want to know even more about).

Where’s my research? Forty years in the classroom. The kids who trust me when I say there is great pleasure in writing even though it is immensely hard work. The kids who are willing to take risks by writing about those things that truly matter to them, no matter how difficult those topics may be. The kids who are willing to work hard because they hear what they did well, and it inspires them to dig deeper into their topics or issues or stories with the questions and suggestions they are given. These are the kids who work hard at their writing—without rubrics, without formats. These are the kids who find their voices and want to develop them. These are the kids who face each piece of writing as a new problem to solve.

Kids can write, and they can write well. Don Graves proved that decades ago in the groundbreaking research that drove his thinking in *Writing: Teachers and Children at Work* (1983). Why have we not listened? Because it is hard work. It is complex work. It is messy. And it takes time.

We need to also teach kids how to read like writers. Show them how to use the authors of the texts they read (both fiction and nonfiction) as mentors. Teach them to pay attention to the way the authors that they read and the writers we read together, craft their stories, their articles, their poems, their essays. What do they notice about the writing? What are the craft moves that these writers make? Name the move. What does this craft move do to the writing and do to the reader? How might you use some of those moves in your writing, *IF* those moves make the writing stronger based on your intentions?

As teachers of writing, you must write! Try what we ask our students to do to garner an understanding of just how hard the writing is and what it takes to craft

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our ideas, our thinking, our feelings into works that move others to think or feel or learn something. Write to feel the pleasure in communicating an idea clearly, something that touches a reader to change them in some way. That is not what is happening in many middle or high schools today. The *next* must be what *was*.

Don Graves, Don Murray, Peter Elbow, Nancie Atwell, Andrea Lunsford, Janet Emig, Tom Romano, James Moffett, John Dewey, Penny Kittle, Kelly Gallagher, just to name a few, all advocate for writing for real reasons for a real audience—decades ago *and* currently.

What happened? Competencies and standards happened, supported by rubrics and formats. I don’t want anyone to misunderstand and think I do not have standards. You bet I do. My students tell me my standards are high, and they are hard. In the nine months that I have kids in eighth grade, I want them to be the strongest readers and writers they can be. I expect them to think hard. To take risks. To make choices. They can expect me to think my hardest to give them their best experiences and my best advice about reading and writing. They can expect me to surround them with the strongest writers I can find, writers with whom they can hear their own voices, feel their own hearts. Writers, too, who offer them insights into lives and experiences far from their own realities. I want everything we do to assure them their voices matter and that we need to hear them.

When we allow, encourage, teach kids how to write from their heads and their hearts, living daily in a sea of words and stories and ideas, we are rewarded with writing we cannot put down, writing that compels us to keep reading, like the writing of Michael and Julia that follows. These are not first drafts. These pieces of writing did not come from rules, they came from choices.

They found the ideas in their reading, in our reading, captured in phrases of first-draft thinking in their writing-reading notebooks, developed over time, with responses and questions and suggestions from peers and from me. With time to let ideas develop and grow. With choices as to what they wrote, how they wrote, and why they wrote.

With Julia the piece stemmed from our whole-class reading of *Refugee* by Alan Gratz (2017), writing out our thinking about all we noticed in the reading from these three refugee stories in our notebooks, looking at pictures, reading current articles, and looking at the work

of Nikki Grimes in her book of poetry *One Last Word* (2017). We noticed how she used the words of lines of poetry to recast her thinking. Julia tried this technique.

With Michael, a memory, something important to him. We read lots of memoir pieces talking about what the writer did and how the writer did it, to show us what

they felt and to show us how and why the experience mattered.

Both pieces come from a process that asks kids to dig deep into their thinking, rework, revise—because what they have to say matters, and they believe it.

The Little Syrian Boy

By Julia K.

Waves lap gently against **the**
beach, white foam licking the sand.
The water glows golden with the sunrise, and streaks of yellow cross the pale blue sky.
The morning is still, but for the slow rushes of water that bring a **little**
body up onto the sand, face down. A **Syrian**
refugee, with eyelashes that fall gently on his cheeks.
A young and vulnerable **boy**
who could be sleeping, but isn't.
He will never again open his eyes to see the clear morning.

The Syrian Boy in the Ambulance

He is handed from rescuer to rescuer, his face white with **the**
dust from the rubble, except where it is scarlet with blood.
He is one of thousands of **Syrian**
children, whose struggles take form in this small dazed **boy**.
These are children who grew up **in**
a battlefield, one of skeletal buildings, gunfire, and rubble.
For a moment it looks as though he will cry,
but then he just wipes the blood from his face and onto **the**
seat of the **ambulance**.
The vacant look slides back behind his eyes.

The Children of War

They scramble barefoot over rocks and leave bloody footprints. **The**
sounds of gunfire and echoing booms lull them to restless sleep.
They cannot read, write, or lose themselves in careless laughter.
Are we blind to the **children**
who lie dead on beaches, or sit bleeding in ambulances?
Can we not see the looks of
desperation, fear, and sorrow on their eight-year-old faces?
Their youth, which should be golden and bright, is corrupted by **war**.
In the ruined cities, there are no trees for them to climb.

Wedding Band

by Michael O.

You are ten. In front of 200 people, under a pearl white tent with little plastic windows and tables draped in lace cloth. The audience cannot see your face, hidden by the highly raised cymbals, drums, and a forest of metal stands. They turn to you. The fat man with the beard and the guitar. The giant with the bass in the backwards cap. The trumpet with the glasses. The sax in the trench coat. The guy on keys with the black suit. You freeze. The multi-colored lights are blinding and beads of sweat drip down your face. You think, *Do I start? What song? I'm gonna' puke!*

You are ten. You clear your throat and adjust your top hat. As the fat man counts off, you don't even realize that your arms are moving. You don't fully realize what is happening. It's when the last few bars of "September" roll around that you notice people dancing. In pairs, groups, with drinks in their hands, spilling them hopelessly everywhere. The feeling you get is incredible as a smile breaks onto your face. You are having fun. It's the type of fun that causes birds to sing, the wind to blow, and the earth to spin.

As you hear the bass do that one, familiar lick, you know that the transition is coming. You hear the fat man sing: "*This hit, that ice cold, Michelle Pfeiffer, that white gold.*" You know the song instantly. "Uptown Funk." You see your newly married aunt and your new uncle dancing together. Your aunt in her beautiful white wedding gown, and your uncle in his ridiculously short and poofie kilt. Bouncing up and down and nodding your head, you dance too, and the world slows down.

Another transition. It's one of your dad's favorites. "Late in the Evening." The fat man sings in his raspy, scratchy voice. Nothing like Paul Simon's, but still the same old easy-to-dance-to lyrics that everybody knows.

You are ten. Soaked in your own sweat, the final notes send the crowd into a flurry of cheers. You sigh in relief and contentment. Your new uncle hugs you. He has that new-uncle smell. A mixture of Old Spice and hair gel. You remember suddenly his asking you, and only you, to play for them. You remember his voice. "If you can, your aunt and I would love for you to play at our wedding. You are one of the best musicians we know, and it would be so cool if you could." You remember a flood of emotions when he asked. Fear. Joy. Regret. Anxiety.

Now a feeling of safety comes as your aunt joins the group hug. You look back at the band. The fat man with the beard and the guitar. The giant with the bass in the backwards cap. The trumpet with the glasses. The sax in the trench coat. The guy on keys with the black suit. They smile at you as if to say, "We put on a good show." And you, over a sea of cheers and hollers, smile right back.

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