

The Relativity of Writing Well

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Abstract

Effective writing instruction has been discussed in school meetings and instructional planning, but giving students time to think beside a strong mentor text or allowing them to marinate in beautiful words is abandoned in favor of formulaic, template-based writing. As a result, students fall into a habit of teacher-reliance instead of finding the writing that matters to them. Tired formats, such as five-paragraph essays and grammar drills, take precedence over effective writing instruction. Any effort to write well gets passed to the previous year's teacher and frustration moves us to avoid what we know will work and move kids as writers.

One of the best ways to engage student writers is for us, the instructors, to be writers. In an effort to help them find the writing that matters to them, we need to talk to them, find out what they find interesting, and show them how to use texts as mentors in their writing lives. Explicit teaching is necessary, but it is by no means the end result. It is merely a scaffold. Instead of wondering when students are taught to write well, we should think first about the ways in which we have prepared them. What have we done to help them develop deep thinking about writing? And how has that thinking helped them write about what matters to them?

The Relativity of Writing Well

On a frigid winter morning quite a few years ago, I attended a locally mandated meeting for secondary English teachers. The topic of the day was writing, and one of the day's presenters

was charged with sharing strategies that would engage young writers. We gathered in a classroom at our local high school and prepared for several hours of what appeared to be a lecture-style session, complete with a packet of Power Point notes for each attendee. I took a seat and looked out of the nearest window. The ground sparkled with frost in the early light of day, offering a gentle invitation to grab a notebook and venture outside. It was the perfect day to write, not talk about writing.

The presenter, eager and poised, spoke confidently about the ways she challenged her student writers. She lingered in wordy explanations of her ideology and smiled as she spoke the familiar language of education—”rigor,” “high expectations,” “writing across the curriculum,” and “assessment,” words that have lost all meaning because they are seldom accompanied by *meaningful* artifacts of actual student writing. She shared “exemplary” student samples from her classroom, ones that were meant to demonstrate the proficiency of her students and the efficacy of the strategy. I do not remember the quality of the writing samples, but I do remember my lack of interest. Formulaic writing, templates, and online programs were among the strategies that engaged her students. These did not appeal to me. I reached for my snack and soda.

At the end of the presentation, we were asked to form small groups and determine how well these strategies would engage *our* students in the act of writing. If we didn’t think they were viable options, we were to brainstorm ideas and strategies that would engage them. I pulled my chair into a group of three other educators. For a moment, we stared at one another awkwardly, uncertain of where to begin, until someone in the group mentioned that he would enjoy trying these strategies with his students if he knew they would take them seriously.

“They just don’t like to write,” he said.

The other educators nodded and sighed in agreement and from there, the conversation spiraled into conversation about apathy, poor grammar, and disengagement. I didn't get on my high horse. Not then. Because the truth was, in my classroom, attitudes toward writing were much the same. When asked to write, students were bound by the limits of a prompt or question I'd generated. I asked them to respond to prompts such as, "Where do you see yourself in ten years?" or "What, in your opinion, are the qualities of a good human and do you feel you possess these qualities?" At the time, I thought they were soul-stirring. They had never had the opportunity to write about their own interests or the stories that haunted, defined, and fueled them. Creative writing was predictable, and when asked to write essays, they crafted without conviction and voice. There had to be a better way to teach writing, but I didn't know how. So I listened to my colleagues' comments and remained mostly silent, commiserating with them, but not knowing how to help move student writing forward.

Toward the end of our conversation, one of my group mates asked: "When are students actually taught to write well?" The others in the group immediately offered ideas, stating that elementary school should be the place when students are taught to write well, but somehow, the ability to write well is lost, never conquered.

"How can I even begin to think of trying a writing strategy with students when they come to me not even knowing how to write well?" one woman who taught tk grade ventured.

They agreed.

I, however, was frustrated. I didn't know how to respond to this question, but something about it angered me. I didn't know why then, but now, several years beyond this experience, I am beginning to understand why.

It was around the time of that meeting that I had begun taking writing seriously. I had dabbled in it before, but a lack of confidence coupled with a misunderstanding of what it meant to *be* a writer derailed my attempts. I didn't know about the importance of writing every day or how writers must wade through tons of rough writing to get to the good stuff. When I had tried fiction, the characters were angst-ridden and uninteresting, and the plot was burdened with overt symbolism. I was trying too hard to write like Shakespeare, Austen, Morrison, and Ackroyd. I also used too many SAT-style words, but had yet to consider shades of meaning. Attempts to write poetry were no better. I weighed stanzas down with abstraction, overused adjectives, and relied too heavily on flowery language. The writing was just clunky.

When I discovered professional writing, the type that balanced beautiful educational philosophy with story and strategy, I felt as though I had found my niche. These teacher authors wrote with passion and conviction, and their prose was eloquent because they were writing about what mattered to them. These teacher-writers inspired me, and I longed to be more like them. They made me want to share stories from *my* classroom. When I “tried on” that type of writing, it felt natural and real. I didn't have to embellish the sentences with symbolism or advanced vocabulary. The ideas and my lived experience just seemed to carry the writing.

Driven by my desire to write, I embraced a different kind of reading. I wasn't reading just to glean strategy from master educators, but was reading as a writer, trying to identify structure and pattern inside the writing of those I admired. Don Murray's *Read to Write* and Ralph Fletcher's *What a Writer Needs* helped me think in terms of concision—what really mattered and how can I get to the heart of it without unnecessary words to weigh it down? Penny Kittle's *Write Beside Them* and Linda Rief's *Seeking Diversity* served as mentors for writing about my teaching life, and they helped see the rich possibility within narrative nonfiction—weaving

classroom stories with instructional advice. Looking at these texts differently elevated my work, both writing and teaching. I started blogging, and the public platform became a space for me to wrestle with ideas and share the work I did alongside students. Each blog post breathed new life into my ability as a writer.

After a year of blogging, I was given the opportunity to write a book, *Sparks in the Dark*, with my friend, Todd Nesloney. Together, we blended our work with literacy into a single professional text, providing educators with a good springboard to establish authentic reading and writing practices in their schools. It was a solid first book, but like so many things we write, we realize how much stronger they could have been. I re-read it not long ago and noticed the intersections where we could have written into the ideas a bit more. But as is the case with writing, there is always room for revision. The real question is this: did I grow from this experience?

Several months after the release of *Sparks in the Dark*, an editor, who now edits my work, landed on my blog and was interested in what I had to say. With her, I chiseled an outline and tentative table of contents around being a reflective reader. Within a month, I had written about twenty-five pages, but, once again, the writing needed work. With my first book, I often tried to let the words drive the idea, focused more on trying to make it sound beautiful instead of just writing what I meant, but my experience with writing was showing me that the *idea* should drive the words. That shift in thinking was paramount to the writing I would continue to do.

Although I continued to read educational texts and research articles, I found books about writers' processes and philosophy to be essential reading. Francine Prose's *Reading Like a Writer*, Toni Morrison's *The Source of Self-Regard*, Ursula Le Guin's *Words are My Matter*, and Anne Lamott's *Bird by Bird* were just a few of the books that helped me more authentically

frame my ideas. I started to notice flat sentences or places where the thinking was not fully developed. Reading suggestions in the books I consulted pushed my thinking further and challenged my writing. Professional writers whispered to me through their work, nudging me to reconsider word choice, sentence structure, and organization. I listened.

My editor was incredibly helpful, too. Throughout the writing of my latest book, *Reflective Readers: The Power of Readers' Notebooks*, she identified places that lacked essence. She thought alongside me, advising me to take sections of the manuscript into my notebook, wrestle with them there, then return to the document and continue writing. My craft as an author became more individual and personal; I was more easily writing into an idea instead of around it, something I am still working to correct. To write well is to embrace revision.

At this moment, I have written two books, as well as approximately fifty blog posts—both for myself and as a guest for other bloggers. Each writing venture gives me deeper insight into what Katie Wood Ray calls the “office work” of a writer. I learn more about diction, paragraphing, and ways to engage a reader. I am also braver about redacting, knowing that cutting a precious sentence may, in the end, be of better service to my reader. This journey is far from over, but I am stronger as a writer now than I was a year ago. There is a freedom in my writing that I did not have when I was striving to write *Sparks*. The challenge is still there, but it’s a different type of challenge because I’m writing deeper into ideas, not around them.

Looking back to the question posed in that professional development meeting, I recognize a clearer understanding of how I could have responded if only I knew then what I know now. The question is not “When are students taught to write well?” It’s “When students write, are we galvanizing their efforts with support, rich mentor texts, and multiple opportunities to get it right?” My friend, Laura Robb, researched writing in middle school and found that

students became stronger, more capable writers when they read a text, discussed what they noticed, and used that text as a mentor to guide their writing. Conversations about strategies, it seems, should rise from the types of text we teach, not drive the types of texts we select.

Writers never sit down to apply a strategy, much like a carpenter never begins hammering without a vision of what a final product will look like, whether a house or furniture. It begins with vision and a willingness to work through the hard parts. Writing well is all about relativity: where I am now in my writing journey is directly related to my experience, both as a writer and a reader. A year from now, my understanding will be deeper. Students are taught to write well every time they are encouraged to write. But that understanding is not static. It develops and extends with each sentence they craft. We help writers to write well when we commit to moving them forward. Perhaps it isn't a question of writing well, but a commitment to writing better. That adjustment in language changes perspective and shifts the responsibility from one moment in time to growth over time. And that's what I want to do: help students become better writers than they were a year ago.

At this moment, I am writing a new book, working through blog ideas, collaborating with writers of fiction and nonfiction, and stretching my understanding of essays and poetry. A year from now, I hope that I am stronger, wiser, and more able to move students and myself forward as writers. To write well is to commit to the process— to write every day, to read as much as possible, and to follow ideas— not words— where they may lead. But instead of writing well, I just want to write better.

And that's what I want for students, too.

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