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Teaching *True* and *To* the Test in Writing

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Researchers share what they learned from six exemplary teachers of writing who teach within high-stakes accountability systems while remaining true to sound theory and practice in teaching their children to write.

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Teaching *True* and *To* the Test in Writing



In this article, we focus on what we have learned from six exemplary teachers of writing who teach within high-stakes accountability systems in Kentucky and Washington. Based on what we

have seen in their classrooms and discussed with them and their students, our response to the reality of high-stakes testing is the need to “Teach *True* and *To* the Test in Writing.”

Our first response—*true*—aligns with our interest in how writing teachers help their students prepare for annual tests while remaining committed to effective pedagogy. The six teachers believe that they must

be true to sound theory and practice in teaching their children to write. They encourage daily writing in their process classrooms and give many opportunities for topic choice as well as conferencing. They emphasize craft through the study of published models and lessons on voice, developing ideas, organization, and convention. In short, they encourage authentic writing for different audiences and purposes. Nonetheless, the emphasis on teaching to the test is an inescapable reality in their classrooms. Thus, they pay attention to the required testing demands, and in many states, including Kentucky and Washington, the demands are high.

We begin this piece with background on writing reform and assessment and then introduce the teachers and schools. Finally, and most important, we address five points that we feel are essential to sound theory and practice in preparing children to write well and score well on assessments: (a) understanding the criteria; (b) analyzing various models; (c) responding to others' writing; (d) reflecting on one's own writing; and (e) rehearsing the performance.

REFORM AND ASSESSMENT IN WRITING

It was the best of times, it was the worst of times, it was the age of wisdom, it was the age of foolishness, it was the epoch of belief, it was the epoch of incredulity, it was the season of Light, it was the season of Darkness, it was the spring of hope, it was the winter of despair, we had everything before us, we had nothing before us, we were all going direct to Heaven, we were all going direct the other way. (Dickens, 1981, p. 1)

Current issues in writing remind us of the oxymoronic opening of *A Tale of Two Cities*. To contemplate writing reform is to live in the season of

Light. The "conditions that encourage good writing" (Graves, 1994) are visible in many classrooms, offering children time to write and topic choice as well as opportunities to share their work and to benefit from teachers' demonstrations of writers' craft. In process classrooms, writing is embedded in children's social worlds and allows them to talk with and talk back to others' words and worlds (Dyson, 1997). Literature provides children with exemplary models for discovering new topics and new ways of saying what they want to say (Harwayne, 1992). As Ray (1999) explains, they are learning to "do the sophisticated work of separating *what it's about* from *how it is written*" (p. 10).

On the other hand, to contemplate assessment is to dwell in the season of Darkness. Kohn (2000) suggests that "standardized testing has swelled and mutated, like a creature in one of those old horror movies, to the point that it now threatens to swallow our schools whole" (p. 60). For Newkirk

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(2000), the monster is no less menacing: "Driven by state testing, teachers are being pulled toward prompt-and-rubric teaching that bypasses the human act of composing and the human gesture of response" (p. 41). He feels that rubric-based assessment is "capitulation" rather than "preparation"—a view that leans on the dark side of Dickens' (1981) quote to indicate that under such a system, rather than attaining Heaven, we are "all going direct the other way."

However, educational measurement expert Lorrie Shepard (1991) takes a more balanced view, explaining that authentic assessments have the potential to measure "complex performances that directly represent the ultimate goals of education. Thus practice on such tasks would lead instruction in a positive direction" (p. 235). Her words align with the view that it is best to "build assessments toward which you want educators to teach" (Resnick & Resnick, 1992, p. 59). Writing assessments that ask students to collect their work in portfolios or to provide written responses to prompts were created to point educators in such a positive direction.

Still, measurement experts are not blind to the potential flaws. Shepard (1997) explains that "even with performance assessments, students may rely on familiar, rote routines and pretend to know" (p. 20). And Linn (2000) believes that even the best assessment systems can be distorted when high-stakes accountability is attached. As Calkins, Montgomery, and Santman with Falk (1998) explain: "Because of the high stakes associated with test scores, far too many educators across the nation are staffing their schools, grouping their children, and designing their curriculum with one goal in mind: to raise test scores" (p. 3). Still, the reality of high-stakes accountability linked to performance assessments has forced individuals who formally kept at a distance from testing to try to "help teachers live thoughtfully in the presence of tests and to do so without selling their souls" (p. 8). In the next section, we introduce six teachers who have learned to do just that.

EXEMPLARY TEACHERS' PASSION FOR WRITING

For the past five years, our team has been researching the assessment

reform efforts in Kentucky and Washington through surveys and case studies of exemplary sites. Using exemplary sampling (Heath & McLaughlin, 1993), we located our schools after discussions with state and district leaders as well as site visits with principals and teachers. We were not searching for “no wonder” schools with populations from high socioeconomic communities or magnet schools for the gifted. We didn’t want our selections to invite comments like, “Well, *no wonder* they can do it. Look at their population and resources.” Instead, we wanted schools and teachers where we would have to look deeper than surface explanations for why good things were happening. Descriptions of the teachers in six of the schools follow. The teacher names are pseudonyms selected by the participants themselves.

In Kentucky, Ms. Jazz taught fourth grade in a rural Appalachian school where eighty percent of the children qualified for free and reduced lunch. While Ms. Jazz paid close attention to the ongoing as well as the annual assessment requirements, she felt more driven to help her children see writing as a way of thinking. In one of our visits, she told her class, “You’re not writing to answer this test question. You’re writing to learn for the rest of your life!”

Two hours up the road in a rural school with seventy percent free and reduced lunch, Mr. Bass taught his seventh graders in similar ways. He balanced instruction of genres typically assessed in state prompts with insights into the beauty of other forms. He was a poet who shared his writing with his students: “I really love teaching poetry . . . [and] talking about how to make the senses available to the reader when you’re writing poetry.”

A fourth-grade teacher, Ms. Olinski seamlessly integrated writing and

reading into her daily workshop in a suburban Kentucky school with forty percent free and reduced lunch. She was also a writer who shared her pieces to garner helpful criticism from her students. She

We wanted schools and teachers where we would have to look deeper than surface explanations for why good things were happening.

considered writing experts mentors from afar and believed that Donald Graves’ (1983) “Let the children teach us”—was the impetus for her work. After one observation of her class she told us, “Writing is my passion. I was called to do this.”

In the seventh grade, Ms. Morgan’s Kentucky middle school had thirty-five percent of its students on free and reduced lunch, and she was notable for her exquisite organizational skills. When she taught a new genre, she provided packets of materials which included benchmark pieces, informational articles, as well as revision and editing checklists. When asked about her goals as a writing teacher, she explained: “You’ve got to give them the tools to be successful.”

Ms. Wright taught fourth grade in a highly diverse elementary school in suburban Washington, where fifteen languages other than English were spoken. Their free and reduced lunch count was at sixty-eight percent. Ms. Wright integrated literacy with social studies, and she placed a special emphasis on genre. She explained: “If you’re going to have them write a genre, they have to read it. I know that’s common sense, but it makes such a difference. They have to read it so they can write it.”

The Washington middle school had twenty-five percent racial and ethnic diversity and twenty-six percent of the students were on free and reduced lunch. As a seventh-grade

teacher, Ms. Underwood loved to assemble “bits and pieces” from various resources (e.g., anthologies, writing experts’ books) to create original curriculum. She rejected materials that were too prescriptive

or too oriented toward the annual test: “My bottom line is responsibility to the kids. Some districts have gone to exclusive [testing] packets. ‘You can’t do this. You can’t do that.’ And I couldn’t teach that way.”

FIVE POINTS OF TEACHING TRUE AND TO THE TEST IN WRITING

Figure 1 illustrates the key ideas we want to share about the ways the six teachers teach writing. At the center of the figure the notebook image offers some of the forms students learned, and the circle of arrows emphasizes the continual integration of the language arts. Most important, the students did not just write to focus on the test; instead, as Ms. Jazz explained, they wrote “to learn for the rest of their lives.” Still, in the high-stakes environment of state testing, these teachers gave their students substantive opportunities to show how well they were learning to write. In consideration of the required performance assessments, the teachers had “developed the understandings necessary to transform their instruction and to make the new kinds of tasks an integral part of it” (Shepard, 1991, p. 237). The points of instruction are the five points of the star, which we explore in the following sections.

Understanding the Criteria

One of the first things the six teachers did was to help students understand the established criteria

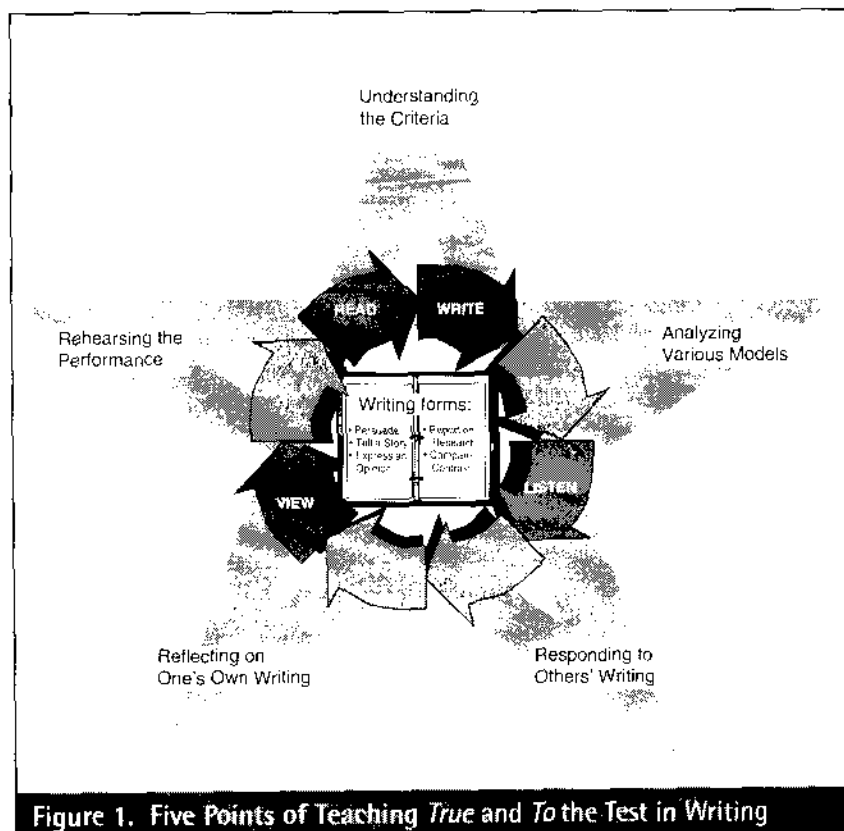


Figure 1. Five Points of Teaching True and To the Test in Writing

for evaluating their writing. These criteria included the general goals or standards that a state hopes children will meet, the specific rubrics for scoring children's writing, and the genres students are expected to use (See Table 1). In terms of standards, Washington has the Essential Academic Learning Requirements in Writing (Office of Superintendent of Public Instruction, 2000), while Kentucky sets writing under the first of six Academic Expectations (Kentucky Department of Education, 2000).

These generalized standards are then placed in the context of more specific rubrics for scoring children's writing. In Washington, where children complete two on-demand writing prompts in the annual Washington Assessment of Student Learning (WASL), pieces are scored with a "focused holistic" approach. Kentucky provides two dif-

ferent kinds of scoring criteria. Children's writing portfolios, as well as their on-demand Commonwealth Accountability Testing System (CATS) pieces, are scored with a "holistic" rubric. On the other hand, open-response items are scored with a 0 to 4 rubric that attends to the information the child provides. Open-response items are not an official part of the Kentucky writing assessment, but the exemplary teachers included them as a part of their instruction because students have to read a content area passage (e.g., science, social studies) and answer a question in writing.

The emphasis on *genre* is also critical, and both states are clear about the genres children should produce. Washington fourth graders are asked to complete two prompts, one narrative and one expository, while seventh graders address expository

and persuasive prompts. Kentucky children must respond to similar prompts in particular forms, such as a letter, an article, or an editorial. In addition, their portfolios must contain different genres of literary writing and transactive writing which is produced to "get something done" in the real world—such as a persuasive piece.

So how do teachers help children understand the criteria involved in standards, rubrics, and particular genres? First, the six exemplary teachers helped their children think carefully about what they wanted their writing to *express*. What is the purpose of the piece? Who is it for? How can ideas be selected and language chosen to effectively deliver the piece? In short, why is it important to say these things in just this way, and is there a more powerful way to express it? The teachers stressed their state rubrics, providing students with a clear target and guide. And they often asked their children's opinions of the criteria:

"What makes a distinguished piece of writing?" and "If you wanted to move this piece from a novice to an apprentice paper, what would you do?" They used the rubrics' technical language, and terms like "purpose," "audience," and "organization" became a part of the children's vocabulary. Still, the focus on rubrics was never allowed to take precedence over the human act of composing.

Indeed, anyone who has used rubrics knows that even the best rubric cannot capture the unique ways in which a piece of writing calls out to its readers. The point is not to wrench a piece in line with standardized rubric criteria, but to meet and then push beyond the boundaries of established rubrics to take the writing to the next level.

The teachers placed strong emphasis on personally understanding their state rubrics through professional

	Washington	Kentucky
Standards	<p>Essential Academic Learning Requirements (EALRs) in Writing</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • write clearly and effectively, • write in a variety of forms for different audiences and purposes, • understand and use the steps of the writing process, and, • analyze and evaluate the effectiveness of written work. 	<p>Academic Expectations (1.11 for Writing)</p> <p>Students write using appropriate forms, conventions, and styles to communicate ideas and information to different audiences for different purposes.</p>
Rubrics	<p>WASL (Washington Assessment of Student Learning)</p> <p>Two on-demand pieces scored with a "focused holistic" approach,</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 4 points for content, organization, and style, • 2 points for mechanics 	<p>CATS (Commonwealth Accountability Testing System)</p> <p>Both the portfolio and the on-demand pieces are scored with a "holistic approach" in which readers attend to purpose/audience, idea development, organization, sentences, language, and correctness.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • novice • apprentice • proficient • distinguished <p>Open-response questions are scored 0 to 4 depending on the amount of information the child provides.</p>
Genres	<p>WASL On-Demand Prompts</p> <p>Fourth grade: one narrative and one expository piece.</p> <p>Seventh grade: one expository and one persuasive piece.</p>	<p>CATS On-Demand Prompts</p> <p>Students may be asked to narrate, persuade, or respond to text, graphic, or chart.</p> <p>Fourth grade: students are asked to write letters and articles.</p> <p>Seventh grade: students write letters, articles, and editorials.</p> <p>Kentucky Portfolio</p> <p>All portfolios contain a table of contents.</p> <p>Fourth grade: 4 writing areas including (a) reflective writing (letter to the reviewer), (b) personal expressive writing, (c) literary writing, and (d) transactive writing.</p> <p>Seventh grade: 5 writing entries—1 in each category above, plus 1 extra in either personal, literary, or transactive.</p>

Table 1. Standards, Rubrics, and Genres in Kentucky and Washington

development. The Kentucky teachers participated in and led scoring conferences where they discussed the rubrics with other professionals both in and beyond their school sites. Mr. Bass explained: "It's much more effective when you get together with a group of teachers and say, 'Oh, this is why it's apprentice' or 'This is why it's proficient.'" More important, these discussions of

students' writing allowed the teachers opportunities to see beyond the established criteria to acknowledge the unique character development, the careful craft of an argument, or the flash of language that lifted a piece off the page and into the mind and heart of the reader.

With knowledge of the rubrics refined through professional conversations, the teachers were better

equipped to do the most difficult task in helping children understand criteria: genre study (Wolf & Gearhart, 1994). They were able to overlay the more generalized rubrics onto specific genres, stretching and fitting them to demonstrate how certain generic principles of writing work within particular forms. For example, "organization" is a principle that looks quite different in a

Children's Books about Conformity and Standardization

Bang, Molly. *Goose*. (Scholastic, 1996).

A baby goose is raised by a loving family of woodchucks, but as she grows up she feels different.

Bynum, Jane. *Otis*. (Harcourt Brace, 2000).

Otis, a young pink pig, is sad because his disdain for dirt keeps him from making friends with other pigs who love to wallow in the mud.

Fleischman, Paul. *Weslandia*. Illus. K. Hawkes. (Candlewick Press, 1999).

Wesley, an outcast in his school, plants a summer garden that he uses to create a whole new civilization.

Lionni, Leo. *Frederick*. (Knopf, 1987).

Frederick's stories provide pleasure and warmth for his mouse friends during a cold winter.

Lowry, Lois. *The Giver*. (Houghton, 1993).

The idea of sameness is explored in a utopian society where citizens have given up their humanity to eliminate negative aspects of life. See also Lowry's *Gathering Blue*.

Morgenstern, Susie. *A Book of Coupons*. (Viking, 2001).

When the children in Monsieur Noel's class receive a book of coupons from their teacher on the first day of school, they realize that their teacher will be wonderfully different.

Myers, Christopher. *Wings*. (Scholastic, 2000).

In a modern, urban retelling of the myth of Icarus, Ikarus Jackson has wings to fly.

Spinelli, Jerry. *Stargirl*. (Knopf, 2000).

The students of Mica High are unsure how to deal with Stargirl Caraway, a new student who refuses to conform to their values. Also see *Wringer*.

—Marilyn Carpenter

story or a report. Indeed, in terms of understanding criteria, the teachers worked the hardest to explore the specific features of multiple genres with their children.

When teachers felt unsure about a particular genre, they sought advice from writing experts. For instance, Ms. Jazz knew that the nuances of persuasive pieces would be new for her Kentucky fourth graders and

invited her region's writing coordinator to provide a lesson. The coordinator began with sound advice about the genre, explaining that persuasion is to "convince somebody of something we want them to do. And it's hard. Sometimes we want to just whine and cry." She then humorously read a mock piece, with exaggerated moans and multiple "pleases," and the children

giggled at the pleading tone. Next, she seriously read a piece with convincing explanations and asked, "Now you tell me which one is the most persuasive." The children unanimously voted for the serious sample. The coordinator's use of sample texts leads us to our next section on the value of analyzing models. While it is important to lay out the criteria for specific genres, the features become clearer with examples.

Analyzing Various Models

Even in Kentucky, where the commitment to professional development is high, having a writing coordinator conduct model lessons is unusual. So how can teachers learn more about the genres they have to teach? Both states provided multiple models, often benchmark papers which teachers could analyze to understand how the rubric criteria would play out in particular pieces of writing. These models were available for discussion in state-organized workshops, assembled in "handbooks" or "assessment samplers," and even obtainable on CD-ROM.

In Kentucky, Ms. Morgan considered benchmark papers to be an essential tool. When her seventh-grade students were working on a portfolio piece in which they were asked to "defend a position," she helped them carefully analyze a distinguished benchmark piece released by the state. With the model on the overhead, she and her students discussed the benchmark's pros and cons. One student noted how the opening "grabbed the reader's attention and had a clear thesis statement." After their discussion, Ms. Morgan reviewed how the student author restated her thesis, gave examples, and then "made a call to action," something she expected of her students. This benchmark piece, as well as other helpful materials, went into their packets which in-

cluded a wide range of information that her students could draw on in developing their own papers.

Ms. Olinski used a benchmark entitled "Sore Foot" by "a real fourth-grade writer." She asked her students to read the piece in partners and discuss "Why this is a piece of good writing. Think about the criteria that we know so much about." After the partner discussions, the children talked as a whole class:

Ms. Olinski: *Tell us why you think it's a pretty good piece of writing.*

Ashley: *It described the way she felt [when she stepped on a nail].*

Rick: *The ideas flowed together real well.*

Maria: *"[The blood] looked like cherry Jell-O" was my favorite sentence!*

Rick: *I think she has good idea development, 'cause it had "thought shots" and it told what she felt.*

Ms. Olinski: *Focused on a purpose, good organization, and ideas flowed logically. I didn't struggle reading it. I can see the blood dripping off! [The children laugh.]*

Nate: *But her piece didn't have a conclusion to it.*

Ms. Olinski: *If the author were here, what would you say?*

Nate: *I think you should write a stronger conclusion, 'cause it kind of drops off.*

In Washington, benchmark pieces were not as available as in Kentucky for two reasons. First, the reform was younger. Kentucky began its current reform in 1990 while Washington began in 1993, making writing tests mandatory in fourth grade in 1998 and in seventh grade in 2000. Second, its testing did not include a portfolio

with a representative range of genres; instead, students responded to two on-demand prompts. As a result, the exemplary teachers often made their own models. For example, when teaching her students how to write literary criticism of a poem, Ms. Underwood wrote her own analysis of a poem by John Updike.

In addition, teachers in both states often turned to published pieces of literature and exposition to demonstrate models of writing. Ms. Underwood encouraged her students to analyze the dialogue in S. E. Hinton's (1995) *The Outsiders*, to make their dialogues more effective. Ms. Wright stressed the importance of exaggeration when she taught her students about tall tales. Together they brainstormed their own responses to the opening phrase, "It was so hot . . ."

Alice: . . . *that you couldn't spit.*

Ryan: . . . *their words melted.*

John: . . . *that I melted into a pool of goo.*

Daren: . . . *that my plow evaporated!*

She then asked her fourth graders to read the story of "Davy Crocket" (Osborne, 1991) and write down the exaggerations they found. The children immediately recognized the improbability implied by constructions like "Davy, who could carry thunder in his fist . . ." One student read the first page, raised his hand, and exclaimed: "Ms. Wright, we'll

they encountered, but the point about exaggeration had been made.

Responding to Others' Writing

Another point that the exemplary teachers consistently made was the need for feedback, especially from teachers and peers. In Washington, one of the four Essential Academic Learning Requirements stressed the need to "analyze and evaluate the effectiveness of written work"; in Kentucky the mantra among teachers and children was "the writing's never done." As Ms. Olinski told her fourth graders:

You've heard the expression from famous writers who say, "Writing is never finished. You just decide to stop." But we're not stopping yet. I believe the pieces that you've developed show you as awesome writers. But we can get more awesome! This month, we'll take a look at the pieces that we've selected [for our portfolios] and think about the criteria that we use in order to develop our writing. Peer conferencing can help you discover the hidden treasures that you have.

Hidden treasures were often discovered through questioning. Rather than offering direct advice on what an author *should* do, teacher and peer readers formulated questions about an author's choices and expressed their curiosities about aspects of the writing (McIver & Wolf, 1999). In her conferences, Ms. Olinski used questions to show her stance as a curious and analytical reader, and

Indeed, anyone who has used rubrics knows that even the best rubric cannot capture the unique ways in which a piece of writing calls out to its readers.

have to write down the whole story. The whole thing is exaggerations!" Laughing, Ms. Wright told them they could write down the first five

her children took up her stance when they read their peers' work. We watched a peer conference between two girls. One had written a

story about a monster lurking under Jessica's new bed—a monster that turned out to be her father's cardigan. After a lengthy discussion, the child offering feedback wrote down her most important queries:

- Could you explain if Jessica was rushing her dad to put the bed together?
- After she found out that the monster was just her dad's old sweater, did she go back to bed?
- Was Jessica still scared?
- Does Jessica like the bed now?

We asked the author if she found these written questions helpful. She nodded and replied, "When I read it again, I understand more 'cause she explained more." She also felt that questions gave her more room to express herself as a writer, referring back to her teacher's emphasis on authorial choice: "Some kids have to write exactly what the teacher tells them to. But I think it's pretty cool that we get to write what we want. We don't have to write about the time in our life when we went canoeing. We can write what we need to write."

When students were asked to write in a particular genre, choice and questioning remained essential. In Ms. Wright's fourth-grade classroom, the children were writing research papers on the American West. Ali was writing about Sacajawea. Ms. Wright asked her: "How are you going to lay out your body paragraphs?" Ali replied, "I could go from when she was born to when she died." Ms. Wright nodded, "Is that the way you want to do it? Chronologically?" Later, in a peer conference Ali received two more questions to consider. Dee read her introduction and asked, "Did you tell us why you chose that topic? And [what's] your focus question?" In her next revision, Ali responded:

"My focus question is 'Why is Sacajawea important to our history?'" Conferencing in the elementary classrooms centered on questions—whether voiced orally or written down. The middle school classrooms, however, provided more routines for response. In reviewing their peers' position papers, Ms. Morgan asked her Kentucky seventh graders to highlight supporting arguments in green and underline transition words in blue. She asked them to highlight the introduction in purple "if the first paragraph grabs the reader's attention." The specificity required by such tasks demanded that peer reviewers visually justify what the piece contained and what might be missing. Still, the emphasis on

When students were asked to write in a particular genre, choice and questioning remained essential.

needed parts was only a way to get to the meaning of the whole piece. On the Revision Sheet she created to aid effective peer reviews, Ms. Morgan stressed that Making Sense was the most important category and she continually encouraged students to help each other through asking questions.

Helping each other was critical to Ms. Underwood's seventh-grade class in Washington as well. She asked students to write a Literary Analysis of a poem, exploring at least two elements (e.g., rhyme and imagery) that they found essential to their selected piece. After drafting, she asked them to seek peer response, explaining: "First of all—and don't you [the author] tell them—can they tell what two elements your paper discusses? Secondly, they're going to tell you what

they like about your essay. Finally, they can tell you what they think you need to work on."

One student, Cassie, struggled with an analysis of a poem by Naomi Long Madgett (1994) entitled "Woman with Flower." She knew that she wanted to talk about the use of metaphor in the piece, but she disagreed with the central metaphor. She felt that "flowers *should* be nurtured," and couldn't understand why the author disagreed in the first two lines of the poem: "I wouldn't coax the plant if I were you. Such watchful nurturing may do it harm." Cassie wrote bits and pieces of her analysis and finally turned to a peer who read the poem and responded:

Ron: *If a person gets too much nurturing they—*

Cassie: *Drift away.*

Ron: *Okay, Cassie, it says "give it the chance to find the sunlight." So if you nurture a person too much they won't want to go out on their own.*

Cassie: *Too much nurturing? But that's not what I believe. You need to be cared for!*

Ron: *It says the things we love we have to learn to leave alone, so that's what the going towards the sunlight on their own means.*

Cassie: *So you can help them grow?*

Ron: *Yes, but they have to do some of it by themselves.*

Ron offered Cassie a new way of thinking about the poem's central metaphor. But he also made room for Cassie's opinion on the necessity of care in learning to thrive. Indeed, Ron's advice could be a metaphor for our next section, for although it is critical for young writers to receive thoughtful teacher and peer feedback, they must also "do some

of it by themselves" and learn to be self-reflective about their writing.

Reflecting on One's Own Writing

Being self-reflective about writing is a goal in both states. The Washington Essential Academic Learning Requirements suggest that students learn to evaluate their own work. The emphasis on self-reflection is also clear in Kentucky's portfolio requirement for a "letter to the reviewer" where students reflect on their growth as a writer.

We debated whether to emphasize responding to others' writing or reflecting on one's own writing first. We felt that the students often learned how to be self-reflective from the thoughtful response they received from others about their work. Still, arguing which comes first fails to effectively acknowledge their reciprocal relationship. This was made especially clear in our interview with a fourth grader in Ms. Jazz's Kentucky classroom. We were talking about a mystery story she had written, and she suggested that at one point in creating her piece she had had some trouble:

Tish: *I got writer's block after that, and I didn't know what to do.*

Shelby: *Oh, writer's block. How did you get unstuck?*

Tish: *Ashley [another student in the class]. She was working on her Nancy Drew thing and she was sitting right beside me. I asked her how she was doing hers, and she showed me, and I finally figured out what to do.*

Shelby: *You know, some people say that all writers need is a quiet room, a place to write. But you seem to need to be able to talk things out. Is that right?*

Tish: *Yeah. Quiet room and a friend is all I need.*

In times of testing, however, children did need opportunities to reconsider

and revise their own writing without the help of a friend, even though they resisted the notion.

Students felt disadvantaged by a system that emphasized the importance of response and then denied it during testing time. However, because they were taught to provide and receive feedback and to engage in writing as good readers do, they internalized the processes and could often apply them without assistance when testing time came. As Charles, a Kentucky fourth grader, told us concerning on-demand prompts: "Let's go back to that saying, 'Writing is never over.' I used to think that writing is over once you finish your draft. And then I got into Ms. Olinski's class. She taught us revision, feedback. I bet that's why I'm such a good writer now."

Charles' confidence, however, was not a casual boast. He was able to show us specific places in his portfolio where he had taken the time to reconsider his writing, and this was true of many students. The teachers' daily writing workshops, especially the emphasis on response, became

each kind of writing her seventh graders were attempting. In preparing their character dialogues, she gave her students a handout with two self-assessment sections. First, they evaluated the communication styles and conventions of their draft dialogues. Second, they analyzed their sentences on a grid to count the number of words in each of their sentences and the verbs they used, which allowed them to look for sentence variety. When we asked if the self-assessment helped, one girl nodded, "It woke me up to what I needed to do."

In Kentucky, visible and available self-assessment ideas were even more pronounced. In addition to commercial posters on the writing process and genre features, teachers displayed helpful acronyms. Ms. Morgan emphasized C.A.R.E. with her seventh graders: "C is for Change, A is for Add, R is for Rearrange, E is for Eliminate—revising is when we take C.A.R.E. of our writing." In the fourth grade, Ms. Olinski had a C.U.P.S. poster that focused on Capitalization, Usage, Punctuation, and Spelling. Again, the emphasis

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echoes in the ear when children were required to revise alone.

Teachers made other critical choices in providing support for student self-reflection. One of their most important decisions was to make the elements of sound writing visible and available—posting them on bulletin boards and clipping them to the inside cover of their students' writing portfolios. Ms. Wright in Washington had large posters describing the writing process and various genres for her fourth graders. Ms. Underwood provided evaluative opportunities for

was on questions the children could ask—those for Capitalization were "Have I capitalized: beginning of sentences? proper nouns?"

Every Kentucky classroom we visited had posted the state rubrics. Official descriptions of novice, apprentice, proficient, and distinguished writing stretched above their chalk boards. In Ms. Jazz's classroom, written reminders of the "four-column method" were laminated and taped to her fourth graders' desks to help students with open-response items, where they

had to read a passage and answer a question in writing. Each of the four columns is topped with a heading

teach true as well as to the test in writing was to offer their children multiple opportunities to rehearse

One final but essential aspect of how exemplary teachers teach true as well as to the test in writing was to offer their children multiple opportunities to rehearse their writing within the test conditions.

and a question, and students use the remaining column space for notes:

Know: What do I need to know in order to answer this question?

Do: What is this question asking me to do?

Examples: What examples from the article can I give to answer each part of the question?

Connections: How can I connect some part of my answer to a real-life situation?

Thus, the “four-column method” emphasized student self-reflection through questioning.

When Mr. Bass taught his seventh graders how to use this tool, he used a state-released question as a model. He then created his own hypothetical responses to demonstrate the levels of response according to the state rubric, reminding his students that unlike their portfolio pieces, open-response items were not a time for a lot of personal voice:

Before you answer a question, you must know how to break that question apart, analyze it. You can't just fly by the seat of your pants and do what you want to do. You have to plan your answer. They [test scorers] are really interested in how you answer the question. Bottom line: Answer the blessed question!

This admonition would come in handy when his students faced the annual test. One final but essential aspect of how exemplary teachers

their writing within the test conditions. In short, they practice how to “answer the blessed question.”

Rehearsing the Performance

Test practice always comes with its own ironies. Mr. Bass explained the annual conundrum he faced in balancing the completion of his students' Kentucky portfolios with on-demand test practice. In the annual test, students are given two prompts and time to produce a final draft response to one. In helping his students prepare, there were tradeoffs. For Mr. Bass, finding a happy medium meant helping his students meet the portfolio deadline—which was usually two to three weeks earlier than the annual test—and then using those remaining weeks to practice for on-demand prompts as well as open-response questions.

When Mr. Bass's students practiced these forms of testing, he took them to the team room to simulate the testing conditions. Because his writing classroom was typically filled with talk as students conferenced, they needed to feel the quiet of the conditions. They had to understand the moment when they needed peer and/or teacher response and could only rely on themselves.

Still, simulating test conditions demand organization, especially in middle schools where scheduling might not easily allow for larger chunks of time. As Ms. Underwood explained:

As far as preparing for the on-demand prompts, I did work on structure, especially for both persuasive and expository essays. We wrote an expository essay on the WASL subject from two years ago [explain a good performance—movie, play, concert—to a friend]. They did it in class, but we used more than one day. I couldn't simulate the actual process, because we don't have seventy-five minutes on a regular day to do it.

Scheduling simulations was sometimes supported by the school district. Ms. Morgan's Kentucky district provided “two Continuous Assessment days. This is a mock test that is treated as the real thing. Everything, including special-education modifications and so on, are made. The papers are randomly assessed by the district office, and our teachers grade the rest using our state scoring guide.”

Still, Ms. Morgan more typically provided her students with activities that were less simulations than mini and multiple opportunities to practice their performance:

As a “sponge” activity we work on a prompt every day. Drop everything and write (including the teacher)! It also includes a share time. This works great for middle school children because . . . they need practice in being forced to write on a topic. It also really helps in the development of portfolio entries, because if they like it, they can use it.

In the fourth grade, test rehearsal occurred throughout the year. Washington's Ms. Wright explained, “I give ‘WASL-like’ prompts to my students according to the genre of writing we are studying. . . . These assessments fit right into my writing program. We studied narrative writing and had many times to practice the writing process and take pieces to final publication. Then I gave the final ‘WASL-like’

assessment." Ms. Wright also explored the features of prompts that often use keywords to guide young writers toward specific genres. This was important because in an earlier year of the test "there was a problem with a lot of students writing off-mode."

Teachers also set the tone by encouraging their students to do their best on the assessments and to push themselves to reflect on their work in terms of imagery or questions that a reader might have. Once, Mr. Bass was conferencing with a seventh-grade girl about a portfolio piece—a personal narrative describing a time when she had been ill and her mother helped her:

Mr. Bass: *I want to see this. I want to see you lying on the couch. I want to feel how you felt. I want to hear what you said to your mama.*

Ginny: [Moaning as if she were still on that couch.] *Like, "Give me a Tylenol!"*

Mr. Bass: [Nodding enthusiastically] *Yes. "Give me a Tylenol." Everything like that. Ginny, you gotta be "apprentice." . . . Come through. Work hard!*

Rather than see their state's writing assessments as just one more headache, the six teachers saw opportunities for their children to be challenged in their writing. Still, they knew that if they wanted their students to succeed, they had to provide full-fledged simulations as well as multiple, mini-opportunities for test practice.

They also knew that a positive attitude toward the test was essential, and their talk was replete with phrases like "You can do this!" Just before the annual testing each spring, their "can do" attitude was evident when they combined challenge with celebration. Many of the schools provided pep talks and

arranged for special ceremonies. In Ms. Wright's elementary school in Washington, the fourth graders were treated to a feast, and they attended a school assembly where several fifth graders (who had taken the WASL the year before) gave enthusiastic speeches to encourage the fourth graders in their upcoming efforts. Still, pizza and inspiring testimonials are only culminating activities and cannot replace the performance rehearsal that the exemplary teachers integrated into their day-to-day practice. Even more important, these ceremonies could not replace the celebrations that took place daily within the context of their writing workshop classrooms as their students learned to express themselves in writing.

STRETCHING OUT IN A LIMITED SPACE

In one of our final interviews, we spoke with a Washington seventh grader, Natasha, about her performance on a WASL on-demand prompt. She'd been asked to invent an award and pick a person in her school who deserved to win it. Natasha designed a life-achievement award for a teacher who was a cancer survivor. Although she thought she had done a "good job," she was certain she could have done better if she'd been able to talk with

write this here. You have to write it now. It's kind of . . . claustrophobic. But give me my own space. Let me stretch out. With the WASL, it's just like putting you in this little, tiny box. And they'll say you can't come out until you're finished with this, and you want to stretch out.

Still, Natasha and the many other students we observed and interviewed had learned to create their own space for writing in their classrooms. Their teachers helped them prepare for testing without losing sight of the richness of human composition. The students wrote every day, often on topics of their own choice. They had time to devote to their writing and opportunities for peer and teacher response as well as self-reflection. In addition, their teachers helped them understand the standards, rubrics, and genres involved in their day-to-day writing as well as in assessments. And together they analyzed benchmark pieces and published texts to discern the features of quality work.

Rather than despair over the spring test as the onset of a season of Darkness, the six teachers taught their students to believe in themselves and their writing (Wolf, Borko, Elliot, & McIver, 2000). Indeed, in five years of interviewing fourth- and seventh-grade students, we did not meet a single child who felt s/he was a poor

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the teacher about her experience and have peers or Ms. Underwood respond to her work. And she resisted the silence:

Can we go ask someone about something? No, you can't. You have to

writer. Instead, they told us of their successes, showed us places where they'd reconsidered their writing or gotten help from teachers and peers, and they spoke confidently and intelligently about genre, audience, and purpose. While they viewed the

annual on-demand test as an activity that couldn't compare to their classroom writing workshops, they felt more prepared to meet the challenge of claustrophobic spaces. Because their teachers taught both *true* and to the test in writing, leaning on sound theoretical teachings, varied resources, and creative pedagogy, these students had learned to stretch out and reach beyond the limits of "on-demand" to the very real requirements of writing and learning in the worst as well as the best of times.

Note

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