

Why We Must Get Back to Basics in Teaching Composition

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January 29,
2020



In the world of college composition, we spend a lot of time talking about *how* to teach writing — with as many opinions on that as there are instructors — but very little time talking about *why* we teach it.

Kevin Van Aelst for The Chronicle

Many professors take a philosophical approach, asserting that the purpose of teaching writing is to enrich students' lives, promote self-exploration, or encourage political activism. Certainly all of those can be byproducts of a college writing course, but I would argue that none qualifies as its main purpose. The reason institutions offer — and often require — first-year composition is quite simple: so students learn how to communicate their expertise.

That specific expertise will come from other courses, especially in the major. A first-year writing course is essential because (a) it's the only writing class most students ever take, and (b) without the ability to convey it in writing, their hard-won and costly expertise is essentially useless.

I cut my instructional teeth teaching technical writing to engineering students. Talk about a bunch of people who didn't want to be there. From Day 1, their body language practically shouted, "I'm going to be an engineer. Why do I have to take a writing class?"

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I started answering that question on the first day of class: "Let's see," I would say, "why would an engineer need to know how to write? Imagine you're one of the most brilliant engineers ever to graduate from this program. You get that coveted job with that great company. And your first week, because you're so brilliant, you come up with an idea that's going to revolutionize the industry. What do you do with that idea?"

"Do you take the elevator up to the CEO's office, prop your feet on the desk, and say, 'You know, I was thinking. ...'? No, you write your brilliant idea down in the form of a report that you then give to your bosses. And if your report is informative and persuasive, it will get passed up the ladder."

That was more than 30 years ago, and I retain that same utilitarian mind-set today when I teach writing courses. It served me well this past summer, when as the recipient of a faculty grant from my university's teaching center, I had the opportunity to revamp my ENGL 1102 course — the second course in our first-year writing sequence — to better reflect the institution's new "quality enhancement" program, "[From College to Career](#)," aimed at embedding real-world job skills into the core curriculum.

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My convictions about the true purpose of first-year composition were further reinforced a few months ago, when a former student asked me to look over a paper she was working on for an upper-division economics course. She was already a good writer when I taught her three years earlier, so I wasn't surprised that her essay was well written. But I was impressed by just *how good* it was.

It got me thinking. As a writing instructor, I asked myself, "What is it about this piece that makes it stand out?"

The answer was clear: This student had taken a fairly complex topic and made it accessible to someone who didn't know much about it. In other words, she had conveyed the expertise gained in her economics courses in a way that was engaging, easy to understand, and

persuasive.

That is precisely what we should be trying to teach all of our students to do — or rather prepare them to do down the road, when they have actual expertise in some field. This student is probably a more gifted writer than most, but most students could learn to do much the same thing, provided we follow through on our responsibility to show them how.

To do that, we must get back to basics in our writing instruction, focusing on the following five areas:

Standard American English. Two years ago, I wrote an essay about the importance of teaching Standard American English (SAE), for which I was roundly criticized in certain quarters. If anything — having worked with several corporations lately to help their employees (almost all of them college graduates) improve their writing — I'm more convinced than ever that if we want our students to be successful in their careers, we must make sure they are able to use standard English effectively. Anything less is a disservice to them.

Mastery of SAE is vital for two main reasons.

- We all have the right to use our own language or dialect in our personal lives. But in professional life, the inescapable reality is that not everyone speaks the same language or dialect. All college-educated people in this country should share a dialect, SAE, which is the language by which professionals communicate.
- Students need to understand that everyone — employers, clients, vendors, colleagues, bosses — will make judgments about their intelligence, education, and competence based on how they write. Their goal, and our goal on their behalf, should be to create positive impressions of themselves and their organizations via their writing.

Standard writing forms. The "rhetorical modes" have fallen out of favor in recent years, ostensibly because they're too "stifling." I fear, however, that we place far too much emphasis in writing instruction on creativity — which is not to say that creativity isn't important, just that it should come later in the learning process.

To achieve true mastery in any area requires you first to imitate, then innovate. That is, learn how to do something in the time-tested, traditional way and then, as you become more adept, start to add your own flair. The physician who invents a revolutionary surgical procedure first learned the standard approach, then took that knowledge and began to "think outside the box." The same goes for good writing.

Essentially, the rhetorical modes — such as narration, cause and effect, process, comparison/contrast — are tools that enable writers to sequence events, identify challenges, explain how things work, and evaluate options objectively. Students will have to do all of those tasks in their careers on a regular basis.

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The modes also function as templates, helping writers organize their ideas logically so they can stay on topic and readers can follow along. The single biggest problem I see, as an editor, in the writing of degreed professionals is lack of organization. Familiarity with standardized formats might not be the only solution, but it is one that works and is easily taught.

Persuasion. In professional life, the main purpose of writing is to get people to do what you want — hire you, purchase your product or service, adopt your proposal, give you a raise, follow your instructions. Teaching students how to be persuasive should lie at the heart of everything we do as writing instructors.

Ultimately, this kind of writing is about more than simply conveying expertise — it's about doing so in a way that achieves an intended result.

To teach students about persuasion, we should expose them to the great arguers of history, such as Thomas Paine and Martin Luther King Jr. We can also bring in recent op-eds and articles for analysis. It's especially effective to show students how someone writing in *The New York Times* or *The Wall Street Journal* has used one of the modes we've studied — such as cause and effect or comparison/contrast — to make an argument.

Audience. Most first-year students have no concept of writing for anyone beyond the instructor. That can become a major obstacle in teaching real-world writing. As professionals, they will be writing for supervisors, clients, potential clients, and subordinates — very specific audiences that must be approached thoughtfully and intentionally.

First-year composition must teach students to think about their intended audience and to tailor their writing accordingly. That means providing opportunities for students to write for someone besides us, such as their peers (via peer review) or the public (through blogs or other forms of social media). We can also create writing assignments that are designed for realistic audiences, perhaps by utilizing role-playing.

Write what they know. Perhaps the biggest obstacle to teaching first-year students how to communicate expertise is that they don't have much expertise yet — at least not in academic subjects. But that doesn't mean they don't have any. They usually do, in areas that might surprise us (or, occasionally, alarm us).

That's why I encourage my students, early on, to write about things they know, areas in which they might already have some expertise. For example, they might explain how to execute the perfect penalty kick or use cheat codes to beat a video game. They might explore the reasons behind the campus parking crisis and their own inability to find a space. They might compare two jobs they've held in the past or two majors they're considering.

The truly salient point: The writing skills they develop to convey expertise — even if their topic is soccer or sneakers — are the same ones they will use later on, as professionals, to talk about topics far more complex and consequential. First-year writing courses are where we should be teaching them how.

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