

WRITING TO MAKE AN IMPACT

EXPANDING THE VISION OF WRITING
IN THE SECONDARY CLASSROOM

Teachers
College
Press

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TEACHERS COLLEGE PRESS

TEACHERS COLLEGE | COLUMBIA UNIVERSITY

NEW YORK AND LONDON



BERKELEY, CA

Published simultaneously by Teachers College Press,[®] 1234 Amsterdam Avenue, New York, NY 10027 and National Writing Project, 2120 University Avenue, Berkeley, CA 94704

Through its mission, the National Writing Project (NWP) focuses the knowledge, expertise, and leadership of our nation's educators on sustained efforts to help youth become successful writers and learners. NWP works in partnership with local Writing Project sites, located on nearly 200 university and college campuses, to provide high-quality professional development in schools, universities, libraries, museums, and after-school programs. NWP envisions a future where every person is an accomplished writer, engaged learner, and active participant in a digital, interconnected world.

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Cover design by Patricia Palao.

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Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data is available at loc.gov

ISBN 978-0-8077-6396-4 (paper)

ISBN 978-0-8077-6397-1 (hardcover)

ISBN 978-0-8077-7860-9 (ebook)

Printed on acid-free paper

Manufactured in the United States of America

Writing to Make an Impact

You know the moment—when everything you have ever believed as a teacher plays out in front of you. Your students shine, even if briefly, and there it is.

Here’s one of our moments: We were sitting in on a full day of presentations by 100 high schoolers who had just finished their civic action projects dealing with social issues. They gathered in a local hotel, wearing their best clothes and trying to hide their nerves behind giddy smiles and sometimes fleeting eye contact. Even though they carried with them impressive illustrations of their work—videos, posters, PowerPoints, photos, graphics—they were on the spot. After all, what could be more daunting than talking to peers, most of whom they didn’t even know?

Toward the end of the day, the participants voted on the “best” presentation for a rerun. The group of students who held the winning card stood nervously in front of the large audience and began with a compelling backstory about themselves. Each had some personal connection to teen pregnancy, a friend or family member whose future dramatically changed because of an unexpected baby. But, they explained, the topic was too cavernous for their civic action project. So they decided to zero in on what goes on during health class at their school. Did this required class address teen pregnancy? The answer was “no.” The four students, now curious and more committed than ever, went online to check out whether health classes even existed in all high schools in all states. Again, the answer was “no.”

As their research and writeup took shape, they became advocates for responsible education when it comes to a critical health concern like teen pregnancy. “Otherwise,” one of them noted, “you know where kids get their information. From each other. In the halls. From urban myths. From rumors.”

You couldn’t miss how animated and “on” these students were. Something was happening. The audience of peers—even at the end of a long day—was with them, heads nodding. As for the adults in the room, we were probably thinking alike: Wouldn’t it be nice if all writing opportunities brought down the house this way?

We are not the only teachers who have asked themselves this question. University of California, Berkeley, professor Scott Saul (2018) has done his own soul searching:

I'd started to feel a sense of diminishing returns when I simply asked students to produce what has long been the "industry standard" in English departments: the five-page essay of close analysis. At its best, this assignment allowed students to shine new light on a formerly obscure corner of a text (and prove to themselves that they were ready for the rigors of graduate study in the discipline). At its worst, this assignment felt like make-work to students—something written only for the eyes of the person grading their writing. It was inconceivable, to many, that anyone else might be interested in their thoughts on, say, Emily Dickinson or Robert Louis Stevenson or Toni Morrison. They were writing an essay because they had to, for someone who was reading it because *he* had to—not exactly a recipe for the production of deathless prose. (para. 2)

Though analyzing literature, writing reports, or creating arguments may equip young writers with important thinking and writing skills, too many traditional school writing assignments stay strictly within the boundaries of the "industry standard." Here's how Kelly Gallagher (2006) puts it:

One reason students don't write well is that they do not care what they are writing about. If you think about it, we often ask students to do the kind of writing that we, as adults, *never* do. When was the last time you sat down at home and wrote a draft analyzing Shakespeare's use of biblical allusions in *Hamlet*? Or wrote a letter that aligned perfectly to a rigid, five-paragraph format? It seems to me that we spend a lot of time preparing students for "fake writing"—the kinds of writing they will never do once they leave school. (p. 90)

WRITING THAT MATTERS

If we agree that not all writing is created equal, then the question is: What kind of writing lands somewhere in the top tier, at least where young writers are concerned? One answer comes from the Stanford Study of Writing, which began in September 2001 and included 189 students over a period of 5 years. Author Cathy Davidson (2017) writes about this study in some detail. A key finding will probably not surprise you. Students "do not do particularly well in writing papers just for the sake of writing papers. Rather, students value writing that 'makes something happen in the world'" (p. 93):

The overwhelming majority of Americans will not write academic papers for a living.
—Grant Wiggins

In the typical five-paragraph essay, for example, the writer employs a prescribed method, almost a formula, to shape each section of the essay, and you don't deviate from that structure even if your audience changes. Nor do you need to because, in the traditional five-paragraph essay, the audience is unchanging: it's the

professor. Students learn to write essays that only they and their professor will be reading, in a form and format that are rarely used beyond the classroom. (p. 93)

We notice, as you probably do, that the five-paragraph essay often emerges as the villain. Certainly, it is one of the most deeply rooted structures in all of school writing. We would argue that writing can mean so much more to students when it breaks out of old, tired molds, regardless of the number of paragraphs.

We have it on good authority that many kids—and, for that matter, many teachers—agree:

A large group of college students participating in a research study were asked, “What is good writing?” The researchers expected fairly straightforward answers like “writing that gets its message across,” but the students kept coming back to one central idea: At some point during your college years or soon after, you are highly likely to create writing that is not just something that you turn in for a grade, but writing that you do because you want to make

a difference. The writing that matters most to many students and citizens, then, is writing that has an effect in the world: writing that gets up off the page or screen, puts on its working boots, and marches out to get something done! (Lunsford, 2011, p. 890)

The writing that matters most is . . . writing that gets up off the page or screen, puts on its working boots, and marches out to get something done!

—Andrea Lunsford

We are definitely on board with writing that marches and sings and exists because there is something for it to do. We imagine most teachers want the writing that comes from their classrooms to carry a tune, to change minds and hearts, to stir up a conversation. So, what does writing look like when it falls under these lively banners?

In this book, we hope to expand the view of what it means for *writing to make an impact*, to throw open the door and invite in all kinds of possibilities. There are obvious examples—ones that people are likely to think of first, like persuasion in all its many forms (essays, petitions, flyers, letters, and so on). But what about narrative and poetry and personal stories? What does it really mean for writing *to do something*?

WRITING THAT GOES PLACES

We know intuitively that writing at its best takes us somewhere, or to borrow the famous words of Dr. Seuss, “Oh, the places [your writing] will go!” (Geisel, 1990). So why not wonder, as we have, how we can make more of the writing in school go places?

For starters, we suggest that *writing to make an impact* has many possible destinations. Consider just a handful of examples.

To:

Entertain
Console
Request
Demand
Encourage
Flatter
Question
Enlighten
Condemn
Challenge

We offer this list, not to suggest that students must learn to write for any one of these destinations, but to illustrate that *writing to make an impact* can take off in lots of directions. And then there's the audience. Student writing doesn't really "go places" if it lands solely in the teacher's lap. Besides, it's a back-breaking, merciless job to be the sole guardian of the writing. We assume that you, our colleagues, have experienced, as we have, that moment of truth when students pay attention only to the grade on their writing, not to our perceptive, laboriously crafted, masterful comments. Who wants to be the only audience and responder anyway?

In real-world "audience" and "purpose" are not mere buzzwords; they are task-defining: the consequences of your writing matter for a specific audience in a specific situation.

—Grant Wiggins

Writing to make an impact might get attention or a laugh, make a clever point, shift someone's thinking, touch an emotion, or offer a new perspective. It can be playful or serious. It can take risks or not. Regardless, the secrets behind it are these:

- The students care about the writing and what it does.
- The writing itself exists to make things happen—well beyond demonstrating some kind of competence.
- The point of the writing is to have an effect on someone or something.

IMPACT IN THE HERE AND NOW

Let's be honest. School writing originates in school, no matter how we dress it up or down. It may wander briefly outside the campus walls, but it always

comes back for a grade, or in the best of circumstances, for some kind of learning and sharing. What would it take for school writing to happen in and around school, but to do or be more than traditional school writing?

Writing to make an impact makes contact. It resonates. It inspires or moves or surprises, or convinces, or just plain pleases. As for its place in school, Grant Wiggins (2009) has claimed that it seldom shows up: “*The point of writing is to have something to say and to make a difference in saying it. Rarely, however, is impact the focus in writing instruction in English class*” (p. 29; italics added).

Wiggins suggests that students should be invested *now*, find real reasons for writing while they are learning to write, and most important, have an impact in the present moment. We can’t overemphasize this idea of investment. A 2015 Gallup student poll, “Engaged Today: Ready for Tomorrow,” revealed that by 12th grade, 66% of students are disengaged. “These students are not involved, have little enthusiasm for school, and do not feel they contribute to the learning environment” (O’Connell & Vandas, 2016, para. 2).

When it comes to writing, teachers can create investment opportunities for students by showing them that their writing counts, that it can make some kind of difference, even in school, especially if its purpose is to “cause a fuss.” Perhaps Wiggins (2009) says it best: “. . . the point [of writing] is to open the mind or heart of a real audience—cause a fuss, achieve a feeling, start some kind of thinking. . . .” (p. 30).

The excerpt below exemplifies what it means to “achieve a feeling,” or “start some kind of thinking.” It dramatizes a crisis on an airplane and takes us into the pilot’s head. It sets us up for the unexpected: that expert piloting is as much about improvising and multitasking as it is about working the controls.

In his bestselling book *Outliers: The Story of Success*, Malcolm Gladwell (2008) writes about what pilots need to know so they can communicate in a crisis. He tells the story of veteran Sri Lankan pilot Suren Ratwatte, who experienced an urgent situation in a plane he was flying from Dubai. One of the passengers in the back was having what flight attendants thought was a stroke. The plane was still full of fuel and too heavy to land with the automated landing system. Though Ratwatte knew he could dump the fuel, he weighed the consequences: “. . . countries hate it when you dump fuel. It’s messy stuff and they would have routed me somewhere over the Baltic Sea and it would have taken me forty minutes and the lady probably would have died. So I decided to land anyway. My choice.”

At that stage, I took over the controls. . . . I had to ensure that the airplane touched down very softly, otherwise, there would have been the risk of structural damage. It could have been a real mess. . . . It was a lot of work. You’re juggling a lot of balls. You’ve got to get it right. I’d never been to Helsinki before. I had no idea how the airport was, no idea whether the runways were long enough. I had to find an approach. . . . At one point I was talking to three different people—talking to Dubai, talking to MedLink, which is a service in Arizona where they put a doctor on call,

and I was talking to the two doctors who were attending to the lady in the back. It was nonstop for forty minutes. (p. 190)

Obviously, Ratwatte had to have excellent piloting skills. Author Gladwell (2008) points out that he had to balance the probability of plane damage in relation to a woman's life, and he had to come up to speed quickly about the requirements of a foreign airport. But most important, in 40 minutes, he had to talk to everyone concerned, including the copilot, doctors, passengers, managers in Dubai, and airport personnel in Helsinki.

What was required of Ratwatte was that he *communicate*, and communicate not just in the sense of issuing commands, but also in the sense of encouraging and cajoling and calming and negotiating and sharing information in the clearest and most transparent manner possible. (p. 192)

What is it about this story that makes it have some kind of impact on the reader? The subject is inherently interesting and personally relevant for many readers—what goes on behind that locked metal door to the cockpit, particularly in an emergency. We definitely want to believe that our pilots are supremely gifted men and women who can pull everything together at a moment's notice. Gladwell re-creates the tension of this flight by letting us hear, in the pilot's words, what was at stake. The risks. The split-second decisions. Odds are that readers will pull for the pilot and passengers to land safely.

The story also dramatizes the need for superior leadership and communication skills that go beyond knowing how to fly and land a plane. Gladwell (2008) tells us, "Every major airline now has what is called 'Crew Resource Management' training, which is designed to teach junior crew members how to communicate clearly and assertively" (p. 197).

This writing exists to make something happen. It entertains, enlightens, and engages the reader. It is not a research paper, a book report, or a report of information. It is not regurgitation of what other written sources have to say. Certainly, Gladwell did his reading, but he also talked to live people who shared their experiences and expertise with him. So we, the readers, feel like we are on the inside track.

WRITING IN THE "REAL WORLD"

For today's students, "real-world" writing is often self-sponsored. Whatever form it takes on social media, it happens in the moment and it invites a reaction. It's what Kathleen Yancey (2009) calls "new composing"—writing with the intention of sharing, encouraging dialogue, and participating (p. 5). Our idea of *writing to make an impact* is in line with this new composing. We want to encourage young writers to write with intention (their own) so that their writing might influence, touch, sway, or dazzle, whatever their intention might be.

Ken Lindblom (2015) argues that social media offer the real deal when it comes to writing:

Some may scoff at the significance of social media, but when students write on social media they are devising something to say, considering how best to say it to their intended audience, and they . . . either see that they are understood or they must rewrite it, so they are understood. . . . This is *real* writing (para. 3).

We might add here that if students are invested in their writing as it shows up on social media, then “narrowly prescribed school writing”—to use Kelly Gallagher’s (2011) phrase (p. 7)—is likely to seem doubly boring and pointless.

Mourning the schoolishness of school, professor of education Anne Elrod Whitney (2011) looks back on her own school experience: “So much of what happens in school has always seemed . . . well, fake” (p. 51). Yet Whitney acknowledges, as we do, that literacy activities—no matter how we decorate them with “real-world” purposes and audiences—still take place in a school context. She suggests asking a critical question about whatever activities we devise: “What are their [students’] purposes for undertaking this activity?” (p. 61).

“Real-world” writing, then, needs to be more than a facsimile of writing that lives outside of school and roams around in the lives of adults. Knowing how to make a claim to an insurance company or a complaint to the city council about the potholes on your street is important, for sure. But real-worldliness also means bringing into the classroom the real world of our students—their purposes, their frameworks of engagement and participation. *Writing to make an impact* veers away from schoolishness by opening up opportunities for students to use the skills and habits of mind they display when they create an online presence.

I don’t believe that all classroom writing activities have to connect directly to the real world. The important thing is that the activity has a significance or personal value for the learners and that they know why they’re doing it.

—David Barton

EXPANDING THE VISION OF WRITING IN SCHOOL

In 2004, the National Endowment for the Arts funded a writing project called Operation Homecoming: Writing the Wartime Experience. The purpose was to help U.S. troops in Afghanistan and Iraq and their loved ones give words to their wartime experiences. According to “Soldiers’ Stories” in *The New Yorker* (June 12, 2006), 6,000 troops participated, producing “more than ten thousand pages of writing—nonfiction, fiction, and poetry” (para. 1).

The men and women who were part of this project attended writing workshops led by distinguished American writers. *The New Yorker* (2006) reports: “They were told to write freely, without fear of official constraints or oversight” (para. 1).

In the end, the writing became part of an anthology and a Library of Congress archive as well as the inspiration for two award-winning documentaries.

Indeed, the Operation Homecoming writing made a sizable impact, in this case, on the veterans and their families (those who are doing the writing); on readers and film watchers; and on the cause of helping those who serve our country to heal.

Former National Writing Project director Richard Sterling (2006) notes:

[What they wrote] is a powerful tribute to what happens when people are invited to write and to tell their stories. . . . Providing such opportunities to write—whether to soldiers returning home from war or families recovering from a natural disaster—seems to be a welcome and accepted part of our culture. But I don't have to tell all of you that it has been a challenge to make the vision of writing in school match the broader vision of writing out of school. (para. 6 & 7)

So much of Operation Homecoming speaks to our purpose. We, too, hope to make the long-held vision of school writing broader and, like Operation Homecoming, more connected to life stories and issues, insights and calls for action. We are not rejecting the “required” kinds of writing. We have taught them all—from literary analysis to argument—and would still fight for the

Language, particularly its written form, has shaped our world, it has changed our world, and it has been the first instrument of change.

—Richard Sterling

right to do so. That said, we recognize that much of the writing that students do in school has two main goals: to show what they know or to show what they can do. And yet, there are classroom teachers everywhere who take writing one more step. They invite students to do something with their writing, to use it to make an impact—on a cause, on a reader, on themselves. We also recognize that writing in the 21st century is more public, potentially more influential, and richer in possibilities than ever before. Writing streams and tweets and pops up daily on screens all over the world. This is writing that “goes places,” as Dr. Seuss would say. What better time to give wings to the writing our students do in school?

CLASSROOM CLOSEUPS

To start this book, we talked to secondary and community college teachers—most, but not all, National Writing Project (NWP) teachers. We selected 12 teachers whose work exemplified that extra step, the idea of *writing to make an impact*. We asked them to tell us what they do in the classroom and why they do it. In some instances, we talked to their students about their experiences. The writing from these classrooms runs the gamut, including poetry and narrative, petitions and proposals, emails to others, and reflections to self.

Our stories about teachers take the form of what we call “classroom closeups.” Their purpose is to illustrate how teachers create the conditions for students to do something with their writing. Each closeup features teaching ideas and teacher commentary. In each of the closeups, students have opportunities to do many of the following:

- Learn new ways to write
- Tell their own stories
- Select issues that matter to them
- Keep a reader firmly in mind
- Broaden the audience for their writing beyond the teacher
- Make an impact

We start Chapter 2, “Getting Your Mojo” with a pitch for giving students the background, confidence, and know-how for writing well. Both of the classroom closeups illustrate how students try out new writing skills and new ways of thinking about their communities, and at the same time, develop the ability to assume a public voice, to weave in personal stories, and to communicate with elected officials, newspaper editors, and a general audience.

In Chapter 3, “Writing Your Narrative,” we focus on personal narrative—a starting point for and the heart of so much of writing that has a noticeable effect on a reader and, often, the writer, too. In some ways, the power of narrative to make an impact needs no explanation. It stands out in the student writing in this chapter. Both the classroom closeups and the teaching playbook feature strategies for giving narrative that extra zing to go beyond a simple recounting of an incident for a classroom assignment.

In Chapter 4, “Writing for Poetic Effect,” we make the case that when students experiment with poetic language, they learn how to use words, phrases, and sentences more effectively, not just for writing poetry, but for all kinds of prose as well. Poetry, unlike so many other genres, gives students the chance to play with language, and in the process, to add new “portable” skills to their repertoires. Poetry also offers opportunities for students to bring their lives outside of school into the writing they do on the inside.

Chapter 5, “Writing to Take Action,” features a single classroom closeup packed with techniques for using writing in a civic engagement project. In this case, students learn how to respond responsibly and powerfully to the social forces around them. Civic engagement writing challenges students to be precise and accurate, to make an effective case, to use a public voice, and to reach outside the classroom for an audience. It’s here that we also introduce eight students who talk frankly about their experiences working together on a chosen issue and their efforts to create awareness and change.

In Chapter 6, “Writing to Figure Things Out,” students reflect on their work by writing about what they take away from participating in long-term projects, often including their challenges, processes, and questions. The impact

of reflective writing is on the writer, with a side benefit for teachers, who gain insights into their students' thinking. The classroom closeups and the teaching playbook highlight strategies for supporting students as they look back and learn from their accomplishments and challenges.

Chapter 7, "Writing to Think Critically," brings together narrative, civic action, collaboration, and reflection in the Proteus Project—a first-person research project in which students select their topic, investigate it, engage in a participatory experience, and, most important, think critically about their topic instead of merely reporting on it. A second research project, this time from a history class, invites students to find a moment in the past that intrigues them and bring it to life, including the human drama that surrounded it. In the process, they pose and address a critical question.

A note about the hashtags you will find under the headings and sub-headings in this book. We use them to draw attention and to organize, not to mention to have fun. We've read that "tweets that use hashtags get twice as much engagement as those that don't. Tweets with more than two hashtags saw engagement drop by 17%. Perhaps because too many hashtags look spammy" (Brooks, 2014, para. 14). In addition to whatever role hashtags play in the world or in this book, we are inspired by teachers like Hillary Walker, who has her students create hashtags to capture the essence of whatever article they are reading at the moment. You can find out more about Walker in Chapter 6.

Teachers

TEACHING PLAYBOOK

In addition to the classroom closeups, each chapter includes a teaching playbook—three or four short exercises that give students manageable practice in areas such as making judgments about writing, trying out writing strategies that work, engaging a reader, gathering resources, managing long-term projects, and reflecting on their learning. In many instances, their benefits rest in their repetition, rather than their use as a one-shot activity.

You might recognize the term *playbook*. Businesses use playbooks as a source of activities or "plays" to create better products and services. More familiar is the playbook a sports team relies on in the course of a game. For example, in football, there are running plays to move the ball down the field: *quarterback sneak*, *up the middle*, *end-around*, and *sweep*. On the defensive side, who hasn't heard of *rushing the passer* or *blitzing*?

Playbooks serve as a guide. Likewise, our playbooks are not recipes or lesson plans to be diligently followed. If a sports team ran the same plays the same way in every game, it would be at a disadvantage. Instead, a great sports team adjusts plays to the situation at hand. Similarly, our teaching playbook serves as a starting point. You can experiment with the plays and adapt them to your needs.

STUDENT WRITING

Throughout the book, we offer examples of students' work that we think makes an impact—on an audience, and also many times on the student writer himself or herself. In most cases, we have chosen top-of-the-line writing to serve as models of what's possible. This poem by a high school senior is a preview of what students can do when they learn the necessary skills and receive the go-ahead to break away from conventional purposes for school writing.

TradeBy Makayla Raby

Daddy smiled
as he stuffed the
rusted trunk full
of green, frayed
suitcases and
plastic Walmart
sacks, double bagged.
He spit out
black sludge
onto the dry,
cracking dirt
and muttered,
"Don't go city
on me, girly."
He grabbed
my pale,
uncovered shoulders
and pulled me
tight against him.
His sweat soaked
my shirt and
I sniffed one
last gulp of him.
Pine, sweat, and beer.
He released me

and I hopped into
the decaying
Buick Century.
Momma slapped on
her sunglasses
and lit up her
cigarette, pulling
onto Highway 15.
I watched as the
trees were traded
for towers, the
flowers for cars,
and the animals
for people.
I took a leap
into a bottomless
unknown and I
traded my
down-home roots
for opportunities
not found amongst
the deer, the trees,
or the flowers.
But I never went
city on him.

Oh, the pictures. The sounds. The smell of a loved one. The memories of saying good-bye. The promises we keep. The trades we make—one life for another. This poem calls up our shared experiences. It creates the conditions for the reader to have an aesthetic and emotional response. Simply put, it makes an impact.