

The “Evil Twin” of Writing Instruction: Grappling with the Role of On-Demand Writing in the Writing Workshop

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As a teacher of an Advanced Placement (AP) English course, I have often questioned the role of on-demand (timed) writing in my course. Timed writing factors very heavily on the three-hour exam most of my students choose to take in the spring in the hope of earning some college credit for my course. Many writing instructors are critical of these “high-stakes” assessments, most importantly because they feel they fall short of measuring true student writing ability and that they place undue stress on students, parents, and teachers. Compounding these criticisms is the heavy emphasis that some school districts place on them for measuring student progress and teaching competence. In some districts throughout the country, teacher evaluation and promotion are even tied to testing results.

As problematic as these assessments can be, it seems clear that they are unlikely to go away soon. On-demand writing appears on state-mandated proficiency tests at virtually all grade levels, on AP tests, and on college entrance exams such as the ACT and SAT. Anne Ruggles Gere, one of the authors of *Writing on Demand*, notes that 36 of 50 states currently require writing assessments, which range in length from under a half hour to several hours (Gere, Christenbury, Sassi, 2005, p. 2). In addition, many employers are now asking for writing samples during the interview process (Gallagher, 2006, p.10). While we can debate the merits of on-demand writing, it seems clear that it is favored at various times by different audiences as a gauge of thinking and communication skills.

Before turning to the role of on-demand writing in the classroom, it seems useful to identify the common characteristics of these writing tasks. Most on-demand writing involves: writing to a prompt, or question, which the student usually doesn’t see in advance; writing that is produced under certain time constraints; and writing that usually elicits very little response or feedback from an instructor.

Leading composition theorists have long advocated approaches to writing instruction that in many ways are at odds with on-demand writing. Instructors like Donald Murray, Lucy Calkins, Nancy Atwell, Janet Emig, Donald Graves, and Erika Lindemann all stress the importance of time, ownership, and response in the writing classroom. These favored approaches emphasize student choice in writing assignments, multiple revisions, peer and teacher response, and self-reflection on the writing process. (Gere et al., 2006, pp.10-11) Many teachers embracing these approaches promote some form of portfolio assessment as a measurement of student growth, in which the student plays an active role in the process.

Alongside this prevailing model of writing instruction, and the research supporting its effectiveness, on-demand writing has taken on the role of the “evil twin” in the minds of many writing instructors. Understandably, teachers are reluctant to incorporate on-demand writing in the classroom too heavily or to test students strictly in this manner.

A key question, then, is what role should on-demand writing play in the classroom? Assuming it has a place (if only out of “real-world” necessity), how do we link on-demand writing with some of the best practices of writing instruction? How do we encourage students to see that while timed writing is “part of a system that they must negotiate,” it is not necessarily “an invitation to lose their souls”? (Gere et al., 2005, p. 5)

When linked to best practices, on-demand writing has a place and purpose in the classroom and can stand well next to more process-oriented, workshop approaches. Edward White, in his article appearing in *College Composition and Communication*, reminds teachers that “intense focus on writing for an hour or so can lead to valuable work” (1995, p. 35). He further states that “similarities between portfolios and [on-demand writing] are much more significant than their differences, since both call for the *student production of texts* in response to the assignments” (1995, p.32).

One approach to linking on-demand writing tasks to best practices is a process that Gere and her colleagues refer to as “thinking backwards” about a piece of writing. The steps involved in this include: 1) reading and discussing the **general characteristics** of a piece of writing, focusing on its effective qualities; 2) assessing, sometimes through the development of a rubric, the **specific characteristics** of the model; and 3) **determining what “prompted” the piece of writing** that was generated. An example of this process involves reading a short introductory chapter of Sandra Cisneros’s novel, *The House on Mango Street*, where the main character explains the history of her name and the emotional ambivalence she feels toward it. Students examine the piece of writing in both general and specific terms (steps 1 and 2) and then imagine possible prompts that generated it (step 3) (e.g., “If you had the opportunity to give yourself a new name and a new identity, what would it be and why?”) (Gere et al., 2005, 13-16). Through this “thinking backwards” strategy, students are better prepared to think forward in a timed writing situation.

Activities like these, that focus on authentic texts, move students beyond the abstract and artificial aspects of writing into meaningful discussion of writing. Moreover, they move teachers away from teaching in “test prep” mode a week or so before the “big test.” Incorporating activities like the “thinking backwards” strategy at frequent intervals during the school year can serve the broader purpose of increasing student comfort with on-demand writing.

While the timed nature of prompt-driven writing remains problematic for most teachers, we should remember that in a sense, every writing assignment has some kind of time frame attached to it, a point at which the piece of writing is concluded. Opportunities to incorporate a timing element in various writing tasks, at frequent

intervals and even in small doses, will help prepare students to deal with these situations without compromising the broader aims of the writing workshop.

In my class, for example, journals prompts often serve this purpose. I will write a prompt on the board that students need to respond to in approximately 10 minutes. Recently, I asked students to compose a 20-line poem on their favorite article of clothing. While most students felt an initial wave of pressure by this prompt and doubted their ability to handle the task, most of them were surprisingly pleased by what they were able to produce. Moreover, a handful of students seemed to truly thrive under the time constraint and produced what I considered exceptional pieces. We need to remember that on-demand writing can and should be viewed as a means of differentiating writing instruction, as many students seem to do some of their best writing under these circumstances. On-demand writing also gives us an opportunity to remind students of their cognitive capacities. What often seems to students as an activity that they *can't* do often becomes one that they realize they *can* do.

Many teachers are probably unaware of some of the strategies they are already using that might be considered “on-demand” tasks. Giving students a “ticket to enter” when they come into the classroom, in which they respond quickly to a question about a concept, term, or idea from the prior day’s lesson, serves not only to activate prior knowledge but also to produce a quick piece of writing, even if only a sentence or two. I often ask students to write a 50-word summary of a reading that was assigned as a way of encouraging quick, cogent thinking and writing, in addition to building summation skills. Numerous opportunities exist for incorporating on-demand writing in smaller doses that can help prepare students for more sustained timed writing tasks.

The process-oriented approach of the writing workshop will definitely remain centerpiece of my writing instruction; however, recognizing that on-demand tasks will likely remain a part of students’ futures throughout their lifetimes, it makes sense for all teachers of writing to examine ways in which on-demand writing can be successfully incorporated into their practices.

References

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