

Writing Guideposts that Work for Designing Writing Prompts

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I have been teaching writing now for 33 years, in K-12 Hoosier schools, in community education as the Education Outreach Director with the Indiana Writers Center, and in higher education at Ball State University. I have designed and delivered many best practice writing strategies during my tenure in education. And as anyone who has been in education for several years knows, there are best writing practice trends that come and go.

Almost every best writing practice trend falls under the same best practice tenets we have always known to work; however, they are just presented in a different package. The trends that stand out to me in my career have been Writing Across the Curriculum (WAC) and then Writing to Learn (WTL) and then Writing in the Disciplines (WID; Klein & Boscolo, 2016). And of course, I remember talking tirelessly about the benefits of drafting through the writing process, the “five” paragraph essay, and daily journaling (Bromley, 2007; Jones & East, 2010). And now at my university, we are discussing how to integrate and embrace ChatGPT as a writing drafting, editing, and creativity tool. In the scholarly and in the classroom field, there are camps that agree and disagree on the effectiveness and impact of best practice trends. Suffice it to say, we have all been exposed to countless texts, professional development workshops, and conference presentations over the years where we are told that THIS best writing practice is the one to use.

Therefore, I will not present another writing best practice trend for you to consider. Instead, what I want to focus on is something more micro to the macro writing curriculum and instruction—the writing prompt itself.

What is a Writing Prompt?

The word “prompt,” used as a verb with an object (or in our case, an objective), means:

- to move
- to induce
- to prepare for action (Dictionary.com, 2024).

A writing prompt is meant to direct the writer towards a topic of focus. A prompt can be presented as a statement or as a question to answer. A prompt might be accompanied with a passage, an image, or a video clip to provide context for the prompt. Writing prompts are used to help writers compose nonfiction and creative writing in any expository or genre form.

What is a Bad Writing Prompt?

A bad writing prompt does not move or persuade a student to act or write. Every designer of a writing prompt must first know what they want the writer to demonstrate. What kind of response do you hope to elicit from the prompt? And more importantly.... Why? A writing prompt that stands alone might seem like a good one, but if it doesn’t support or meet the learning goals and objectives, then it’s not.

For example, here is a prompt I have used with student writers: *Tell me a story about a time when you lost something or someone.* Every one of us can speak to that. As you read this, you

can make a list in your head right now of your losses. But without context or a reason to write about this, it won't work as well. In fact, if you stop and write to this prompt right now, you will probably create a list of someones and somethings. And then you might try to write a quick summary of each one. Or perhaps you will speak to one person and that loss, but how do you know what story to tell if you don't understand who your audience is and what the purpose is for writing to this prompt.

I use this prompt in a workshop on Grief Writing/Writing to Heal. Writers who attend the workshop write about grief, but learn to turn their stories of grief into healing stories by the end of the workshop. There are many planned activities, instructions, and prompts that create what is worthy of enduring understanding—to heal in writing through grief.

The prompt *Tell me a story about a time when you lost something or someone* is shared after two other writing prompts, a modeling and demonstration activity, and two brainstorming sessions. And without context and a planned curriculum, I won't receive the kind of strong storytelling that was part of my objective in the workshop. I would not start out the workshop course on day one with that singular prompt, nor would it be the only writing prompt I use.

- A bad writing prompt is too broad and too vague, and the writer isn't sure what the prompter wants or where to start or what to write about.
- A bad writing prompt is too restrictive and doesn't allow for an individual response. The responses to these prompts often appear similar from writer to writer.
- A bad writing prompt asks a writer to write about something they don't know anything about—i.e. culturally biased topics, triggers, worlds, concepts, people they know nothing about.
- A bad writing prompt doesn't allow the writer to explain, describe, support, illustrate, synthesize.
- A bad writing prompt doesn't allow the writer to showcase her or his creativity or voice.

I remember giving the former ISTEP exam one year to a group of 8th graders and the required writing prompt was: *Describe your Perfect Amusement Park*. My underserved students who had hardly ever or never been outside of the 465 loop in Indianapolis couldn't speak to that. Most had never been to an amusement park, a carnival, or a fair. And even if they had, what does the prompt want? Describe the perfect physical space? Describe the experience you would have at an amusement park? Describe who would be there and what you would do? The prompt is too broad and vague. The prompt is culturally biased. The prompt does not allow the writer to be creative.

What is a Good Writing Prompt?

A good writing prompt invites the writer in. It welcomes the writer into a new, but somehow safe and familiar space. It opens the door, asks them to take their coat off, to make themselves comfortable. It's a space that the writer feels comfortable enough to strike up a conversation.

Learning creative writing strategies can teach us how to be better educational and scholarly writers. While creative writing isn't (sadly) as much of a focus in our K-12 ELA standards as expository writing is, we can still draw upon elements of creative writing to help design writing prompts. Because we want our student writers to be able to show us not just tell us, to describe,

illustrate, and support with more vivid detail. Even if students are writing up an Egg Drop Science Report, we want them to show us their process and to support their design and process with stories of how they came up with their winning design where the egg didn't break.

A good writing prompt prompts the writer to use their senses. Even a nonfiction prompt such as *Describe how you just solved the quadratic equation. What did you do first? And then what? And next? And what you were you thinking and feeling as you moved through each step?* draws on the senses. I have used this prompt with students, and I loved reading words like: "I felt good because I remembered to substitute and figure out the value of a." or "I smell the cafeteria, and I'm feeling hungry. I can't wait for lunch!" Students are learning how they learn (metacognition) and learning how our senses and environment impact our learning and thinking process.

Or think about a prompt such as *Tell me why Auggie chose to forgive Jack. Tell me what he was thinking and feeling as he made that decision. Would you have? Explain your decision and how you feel about this decision.* This prompt urges the writer into that critical scene in R.J. Palacio's book, *Wonder*, where Auggie makes a decision and acts upon it. But students have to be able to speak to not only that scene, but the history between the two characters and to Auggie's and to the student writer's own beliefs and value systems.

How about a social studies instructor asking students to *Tell me the story about what happened when Paul Revere made his midnight ride.* Students aren't just telling, they are describing a scene, a character, a plot of events. When you use the fictional arc of *Tell me a story about what happened when*, without even trying, you propel the students into writing a beginning, a middle, and an end.

A good writing prompt doesn't just motivate a writer to *want* to write, but creates a *need* to write. When a writer is provided with a well-crafted prompt, the writer has to write—the writer experiences an urgency, a need to expel the words out of their head and onto the paper.

There are four guideposts that I have discovered that are tried and true when designing a good writing prompt. I have practiced these guideposts with writers who are ages 6 to 90 in and out of diverse classroom settings.

- 1) Guidepost 1: Explain the "gist".
- 2) Guidepost 2: Narrow the prompt.
- 3) Guidepost 3: Create exigence in the prompt.
- 4) Guidepost 4: Present a formula for how to craft the prompt.

Explain the "gist" means to provide context, criteria, the why, and the audience for the prompt. Plan instruction and demonstration. The narrower the prompt, the wider the response from the writer will be. Exigence creates urgency, a need to respond. It's so compelling that the writer can't wait to put words to it. When we present writers with formulas, templates, closed writing activities, we are demonstrating and modeling how the prompt can be crafted. We help the writer who is stuck with a road map.

In Guidepost 4, some align templates and formulas with “scripted.” The most talented creative, educational, and scholarly writers will tell you they have a formula they follow. I have participated in workshops and writing retreats where creative writers share their formulas for crafting creative nonfiction, poetry, fiction, and script writing. Academic researchers will share their formulas for how to cull data, code data, and write scholarly articles about that data.

“Formula” and “templates” are not bad words. The trick is finding what formulas work. Successful writers know what formula works for them, and they repeat it every time they write. Think about your favorite pieces of fiction, your favorite poets, your favorite movie genre. We all know how to identify an E.E. Cummings, Emily Dickinson, or Rupi Kar poem. We all know the formula of the Lifetime Christmas movies. We recognize works by fiction writers Toni Morrison, John Green, and Ernest Hemingway. In teaching writers, I like to present different formulas, allow them to practice, until they find the formula that works for them.

How Do You Design a Good Writing Prompt that Follows the Guideposts?

For me, writing about how to design a writing prompt is a very intimate and emic position and process. As educators, we can design writing curriculum and writing lesson plans, but if the writing prompt itself built into that curriculum and that lesson plan does not elicit good writing, then the writing curriculum and the lesson plan have failed.

Writing prompts for student writing is something all teachers do and most of us can easily show how our prompts support our SLOs. Harder to measure and assess is:

- Did the student grow as a writer?
- Did the student writer craft something worthy of enduring understanding, both for the student writer and for the educator?
- Did the prompt create a writer? A student who isn’t just writing for school, but someone who feels they are directing and perhaps in command of their message, their story, their composition.

Backward Design requires educators to identify what is worthy of enduring understanding. Then working backwards, educators design curriculum that defines student learning goals, student evidence, and plan activities and instruction that ensure that understanding is met and enduring. In working backwards educators determine what is worthy of being familiar with and knowing so that the desired goal of enduring understanding is met (Wiggins & McTighe, 1998).

- Does the writing prompt ensure that the learning goal of understanding is met? Or does it just measure a discrete task that doesn’t fulfil the overarching goal of enduring understanding?
- In preparing students to write to the prompt, have you taught your writers what they need to know to compose the desired outcome of the prompt?

English/language arts researcher and author of *Designing Writing Assignments*, Traci Gardner (2005), outlines ten criteria for designing good writing assignments. Tasks 1, 3, 4, 7, 8, and 10 work well in preparing to design a good writing prompt.

- Deal with the business details. Explain the “gist”.
- Identify the audience for the piece.
- Focus on a specific situation.
- Establish the reason for the assignment (if only for yourself).
- Share models and student samples.
- Talk about the evaluation criteria up front (paras. 2-10).

All of us who have been teaching know that as soon as you present a writing prompt, students will ask how long the writing has to be, if grammar and mechanics count, and why they are writing this. I use a strategy called RAFT to cover the gist, the audience, and the criteria. RAFT stands for Role, Audience, Format, and Topic.

- **Role:** What is your **Role** as a writer?
- **Audience:** Who is the **Audience** for your writing? Who are you speaking to?
- **Format:** What **Format** (the gist) does the writing need to take?
- **Topic:** And what is the **Topic** (narrowing the topic; Santa, C., Havens, L., & Valdes, B., 2004).

After we establish this, then I can explain why we are writing to this prompt, how it meets our learning goals. I can share out writing models, demonstrate strategies for how to best address the writing prompt, and explain criteria for assessment. This is part of those learning activities and goals that will help my students achieve enduring understanding goals through a well-designed writing prompt.

Create Exigence

Exigence is part of the Western Aristotelian rhetorical situation. “Exigence is the *urgent demand* that writers feel to respond to a situation, his or her motive for writing. The exigencies of a situation are a demand put on the writer to respond immediately and urgently in attempt to take action or raise a concern about a specific issue” (Alfano & O’Brien, 2016, p. 9)

All of us experience exigence daily. Someone makes a comment, and we have a strong urge to respond. We might want to commiserate, validate, or disagree. Social media creates exigence for us daily. Someone posts a meme, a comment, an image, a political statement, and we immediately respond with a comment, a sad crying face, a hashtag, or a like. And those emoji’s, likes or unlikes, and hashtags are a response with a defined purpose and audience in mind.

When designing a good writing prompt, it’s important to create this kind of urgency so students feel the need to immediately respond. Students understand the prompt. They are prepared to answer the prompt. They have made a connection to the prompt. They have something to say about the prompt.

I am a fan of using social media in classrooms. My university students create TikTok documentaries over their Write for Change research papers in the Writing Program courses I teach. Students love watching TikToks. We are seeing the use of TikToks not just to promote a fashion trend or product to buy, but to promote a social justice issue or topic in need of change such as #byu or to promote books to read as is the case with BookToks.

The most popular social media tools used by students today are YouTube, TikTok, Snapchat, and Instagram (PEW, 2023). And students experience exigence and write and reply or use emojis to respond daily on these social media platforms. Creating the kind of exigence students experience on social media is something we can emulate and apply when designing a good writing prompt.

Memoirist Natalie Goldberg is famous for her 7 Rules for Writers. Rule number 1? “Keep your hand moving. No matter what, don’t stop. Write whatever comes to your mind. Outrace the editor with your writing hand. If you keep your hand moving the writing will win” (Goldberg, 1990, p. 1). Exigence keeps the writer’s hand moving.

Part of the exigence rhetorical situation is that the writer must attend to purpose and audience. In that moment of urgency to respond, the writer is motivated to respond and has a purpose or something to say in response. And that message is clearly directed at an intended audience. “An author’s purpose might be to describe, to define, to influence, or to call action” (Alfano & O’Brien, 2016, p. 10).

Present a Formula

“Cloze” it or provide some of the words so the writer can fill the rest in with his or her own, use the personal pronouns “I” or “you” so the writer can draw upon the self, and finally narrow the prompt so the writer can zero in on one person, place, or time. These can be written as questions or as statements. It allows the student some agency and choice within the context of whatever subject or text you are teaching.

In creative narrative nonfiction writing, I use examples such as:

- Before _____ and After _____
- I remember a good day. It started out . . . and continued. . .and ended with. . .
- Tell me the story about the first time you.... (whatever). (Jones & Shoup, 2022).

The following are examples from Discovery Educator, Kathy Shrock:

Do you agree with the actions of ...? Do you agree with the outcomes of ...?
 What is your opinion of ...?
 How would you prove ...? disprove ...?
 Can you assess the value or importance of ...?
 Would it be better if ...?
 Why did they (the character) choose ...?
 What would you recommend ...?
 What data was used to make the conclusion?
 How would you rate the ...?
 What would you cite to defend the actions of ...?
 How would you evaluate ...?
 What choice would you have made ...?
 How would you prioritize ...?

What judgment would you make about ...?
 Based on what you know, how would you explain ...?
 What information would you use to support the view ...?
 Can you design a ...?
 What changes would you make to solve ...?
 How would you improve ...?
 What would happen if ...?
 Can you elaborate on the reason for ...?
 Can you propose an alternative ...?
 How would you adapt _____ to create a different...?
 How could you change the plot ...?
 Can you create new and unusual uses for...?
 What could be done to minimize/maximize...?
 What way would you design ...?
 What could be combined to improve ...?
 Suppose you could _____ what would you do ...?
 Can you think of an original way for the ...?

And formulas work very well. Most of us who have taught in E/LA have taught our students how to use the Acrostic Poem or the Haiku formula. But you can use formulas to help design writing prompts in any discipline or with any genre.

- You can use many templates from the *They Say, I Say* series of books that teach students how to write persuasively and to support claims with evidence. There are several available online.
- You can use the 6 Word Memoir to craft a 6 Word Summary, a 6 Word Story, a 6 Word poem.
- You can use Blackout Poetry not to create poetry, but to identify key words or ideas about even a textbook reading excerpt.
- You can use a Golden Shovel Poetry response not only in poetry, but also in response to critical passage from a textbook or a quote.
- You can use the Marion Roach Smith (2021) algorithm she uses with much success in crafting memoir. “It’s about X as illustrated by Y to be told in a Z.” She illustrates further by saying It’s about something universal as illustrated by something deeply personal to be told in some length of a piece of memoir. The z is always the form — blog post, essay, op-ed, long-form essay or book (paras 4 & 5). You can substitute this algorithm into any kind of prompt for a student focusing on the X and Y. *The specific topic we are discussing or studying is about X (student decides) as illustrated or evidenced by Y (student generates that evidence).*
- In Art Museums, dossiers use a strategy called Visual Thinking Strategies or VTS.
 - What’s going on in this picture?
 - What do you see that makes you say that?
 - What more can you find?
- You can easily adapt this into a writing response over any kind of text, visual or written.
 - What’s going on in this passage, this discussion, this image, this video clip?
 - What do you read or see that makes you say that?

- What more can you say about this _____?

If you search for writing templates there are many wonderful graphic examples available out there. I think practicing writers benefit from templates to help them get started and they have a road map for how to continue.

What happens if my writing prompt fails?

Experiment and fail. Read student writing responses, and ask yourself what's missing? What did you visualize or hear that they would write or say? How can you fill that gap? How can you recraft the prompt using the Guideposts? Ask your writers what didn't make sense. Ask them to critique.

Revise it and try again. This allows you to see what is working and it allows students to revise. Keep a log of your tried-and-true pieces and student writer models. Most importantly, write to what you prompt. And see if it supports those guideposts. Share your writing model and your strategies for writing to the prompt. Share your own critiques and suggestions and process with them.

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