Standards without Sacrifice: The Case for Authentic Writing

During my second year of teaching Senior Composition, Teresa was my most challenging student. We were nearing midterm, and it was time for Teresa to decide on her research paper topic. Teresa listened to her headphones with her forehead resting defiantly on her desk while I guided the rest of the class through an invention activity. Teresa had a reputation for not doing much work, which she had not proven wrong thus far in my class, so I wasn’t expecting much for her paper.

The paper expectations were clear: The topics the students selected had to be researchable, the students needed to use primary and secondary sources, and the students were going to present their research in front of an audience of their peers. The next day, when students were supposed to have generated a list of possible topics based on the previous day’s invention activity, Teresa had nothing. Again, Teresa rested on her desk, but this time her head occasionally perked up as she caught tidbits of the students’ conversations. They were discussing issues such as teenage pregnancy, violent video games, guns in schools, prayer in school—issues many high school students are thinking about and can easily research. By the end of class, Teresa’s head was up, and she was listening as one student talked about a recent experience he had had with the police in a neighboring town. They stopped him for rolling through a stop sign, which he swore he did not do. He said, “I think they profiled me.” He was an African American male driving his father’s 1999 Lincoln LS in a wealthy, suburban community.

As she listened to the conversation, Teresa became more and more interested. She chimed in with her own stories about the police mistreating minorities in her neighborhood. She asked me, “Can I write about police brutality in Indianapolis?” I was a bit flabbergasted that she wanted to write anything at all, but I said quickly, “Sure.”

One of the most disinterested students I have ever had in class suddenly found her topic, one that she knew the other students in class had experience with and cared about. For an audience of troubled, predominantly minority youth in a suburban area, racial profiling was an issue that mattered. Her purpose was to convince her peers that something needed to be done about the police in Indianapolis and the surrounding suburbs profiling minority teenagers. She dove into her research for the first time all year because she found a topic that mattered to her and a sympathetic audience to appeal to.

Authentic writing assignments can have this power. They can help students make sense of their world while advocating for change. In the provocative When I Whisper, Nobody Listens: Helping Young People Write about Difficult Issues, Helen Frost states, “We, as teachers of writing, don’t have to help our students shout out their truths; we can help them write with precision and grace....We can support young writers as they struggle to find their most authentic voices, and we can learn to tilt our ears toward those voices and listen” (xiii). I listened when Teresa expressed interest in a topic and, more importantly, her audience listened to her as she described the research for her paper.

Students can write for real audiences and purposes and still meet state and national standards. Lori A. S. Kixmiller confronts the challenge of helping them do so by requiring students to complete a senior project.
Her peers helped to shape her ideas during the drafting process. They questioned her when she made assumptions about the local police, and they challenged her to include some narratives for emotional appeal.

A combination of authentic writing elements helped Teresa succeed on that project: She found the right topic, one that mattered to her; she discovered an audience that cared about the topic; and her purpose was clear—to persuade her peers to do something about profiling. Even though her evidence was a bit jaded, her emotion was compelling and inspiring. Teresa’s paper may not have been the picture of “precision and grace” but, while finding her authentic voice, Teresa found a real issue to write about with a real purpose for a real audience.

There are many students like Teresa in need of more authentic writing experiences, but it takes time to develop units that involve authentic writing. Teachers must carefully consider the design of the assignment, various learning standards, and school curriculum while also being mindful of the purposes and audiences students might be interested in. Their audiences can be their peers; an outside audience, such as a community member or parent; or a more general audience, such as the readers of a popular magazine or newspaper. Effectively teaching audience appeal may seem overwhelming, but it is vital, especially given our current educational climate.

Identifying Authentic Alternatives to Writing Formulas

A classroom that includes authentic writing is student-centered, interest-based, and meaning-driven instead of assessment-centered, score-based, and accountability-driven. Doug A. Archbald and Fred M. Newmann in Beyond Standardized Testing: Assessing
**Authentic Academic Achievement in the Secondary School**

have three criteria for “authentic” assignments: (1) disciplined inquiry, (2) integration of knowledge, and (3) value beyond evaluation (2–4). Authentic writing assignments should require students to move beyond their prior knowledge to the creation and application of new knowledge. Students must step outside of formulas and say what they want to say rather than just fitting the pieces into a prescribed format.

To help students become proficient—not just competent—writers, we need to teach them how to analyze a writing situation by determining the audience and what to say to them—something our formulaic models often omit. A National Writing Project (NWP) and Carl Nagin text, *Because Writing Matters: Improving Student Writing in Our Schools*, explains, “successful writers grasp the occasion, purpose, and audience for their work. They have learned how to juggle the expectations of diverse readers and the demands of distinct forms” (10).

One of our challenges is to develop authentic prompts rather than academic exercises. When students research the issue of school uniforms, write a persuasive essay about why students at their school should wear uniforms, and then use a PowerPoint slide show at the next school board meeting to present their findings, they are doing complex, authentic writing. Prom-theme proposals submitted to the student council, letters sent to their favorite teachers, and editorials written to the school newspaper are all authentic writing experiences because students are engaged in writing that matters to them and are considering audiences beyond the teacher. Patricia A. Slagle states that she has noticed that when “authenticity stays in the forefront... my students are writing more effectively, and when I read and respond to their essays I find the experience more interesting than tedious and sometimes, blessedly, even compelling” (144).

**Exceeding the Standards: East Peoria Community High School’s Senior Research Project**

Through careful planning and thoughtful development, faculty at East Peoria Community High School (EPCHS), a building of approximately 1,100 students in central Illinois, have created a truly authentic project that challenges twelfth-grade students to identify an outside audience, collaborate with community members, and present their findings to a panel.

In the early 1990s, EPCHS had a strong vocational program. Many students participated in courses in auto mechanics, family and consumer sciences, and other skills-based programs. Unfortunately, as vocational education grew, so, too, did the disconnect between academic and vocational courses.

According to Joanne Westerman, the former department chair of EPCHS’s English department, three teachers looking for a way to integrate the vocational courses with the rest of the academy attended a conference session and learned about the Senior Project model from Far West Edge, an Oregon-based educational consulting group (“Senior”). The project required twelfth-grade students to do a major research project under the supervision of both their English teacher and a community mentor on a student-selected topic. During this yearlong project, students would compile research, create a product related to the research, participate in fifteen to twenty hours of supervised community work, and present their findings to a panel of mixed representation (community members, parents, and faculty).

The teachers brought the idea back to EPCHS, where it was seen as the perfect fit for the vocationally driven curriculum. A supportive school board agreed to a pilot of the program, which ran in several English classes. The pilot was successful and several more classes were added until all English classes were involved with the senior project in 1994. Through 2003, all students were required to complete a project as a condition of graduation. Although the school board voted to make the project optional rather than mandatory after 2003, approximately 50 percent of seniors still undertake this authentic challenge.

The students depend on the community members as the primary audience for their research paper and presentation; therefore, it is imperative that community members volunteer as mentors and panel members (up to fifty were involved each year). Also, because the project demands significant resources, it is important to have continual grant money to support extracurricular time with faculty, provide students with computers for research and testing, and hold community members as mentors.

**Authentic writing assignments should require students to move beyond their prior knowledge to the creation and application of new knowledge.**

Lori A. S. Kixmiller
Standards without Sacrifice: The Case for Authentic Writing

printers, and fund the research and demonstration days the project requires.

For students, the first and most important step in the development of their project is selecting the topic. According to Westerman, the students brainstorm possible topics with their teacher early in the school year. She explained that some of the students think about topics well before twelfth grade. The students are encouraged to select topics that accomplish one or more of the following:

> maintain interest and enthusiasm
> lend themselves to active participation
> demonstrate problem solving
> stretch the student intellectually
> solve a community problem
> relate to a societal issue
> involve volunteer work
> connect across the curriculum
> involve taking classes at other community facilities
> relate to a future career

A student could complete a project about the lack of safe playgrounds in East Peoria schools and use AutoCAD to design a new, safe playground with his or her mentor, an engineer, carefully guiding the student through design and construction. A musician could write about using music as therapy for people with emotional or learning disabilities. A nature lover could learn about the impact a major highway construction project would have on the local community. All students, regardless of their project, are required to develop a mission statement that details their personal goals and expectations for the project and helps chart their personal growth, and they must complete a self-evaluation assessing the entire project and their growth as writers, students, and citizens.

EPCHS’s senior project effectively engages students in rigorous, meaningful work. Because the students choose their subject for research and depend on the community members as the primary audience for their research paper and presentation, they develop a real purpose and authentic audience for their writing.

Not only is this project engaging for the students, but it meets NCTE/IRA Standard 4, which recommends that “[s]tudents adjust their use of spoken, written, and visual language (e.g., conventions, style, vocabulary) to communicate effectively with a variety of audiences and for different purposes” (“Standards”). Illinois Learning Standards’ Goals 3 and 5, which relate directly to writing and research, are clearly met by this extensive project. Students write for a variety of audiences and purposes (“Illinois,” ILS: 3.B.5). They are writing to inform a group of their peers. They are writing for a group of informed adult volunteers who attend the demonstration day as judges. They write letters to their judges and their mentor. The students use both primary and secondary research to inform the creation of their papers and projects. Students “[s]upport and defend a thesis statement using various references including media and electronic resources” (ILS: 5.C.5b), and they must “[r]esearch, design and present a project to an academic, business or school community audience on a topic selected from among contemporary issues” (ILS: 5.A.5b).

The assignment also pushes students far beyond those standards. Students are asked to design sophisticated proposals, to write memos updating their progress on the project, and to synthesize data to determine what will be most convincing for each audience. Through compromise and negotiation, the students decide on topics that will be challenging and engaging and then—in consultation with their mentor and teacher, two adults they come to trust and respect—they are pushed to dig deeper into the topic. The senior project prepares students to perform well in any writing situation they may encounter in the future, and it gives them the opportunity to build professional relationships with civic and community leaders and faculty members.

Why Our Students Need Authentic Writing Now

Students need writing that interests them. They need to be prepared for writing situations that will ask them to address a specific person for a specific
purpose. Authentic writing can do that by invoking the power of addressing an audience for a purpose. If we simply design assignments as vacuous writing prompts such as "Describe your favorite place; use specific examples," we are not acknowledging the rhetorical power that invoking an audience can have for students.

Anne Rodier, a high school English teacher, articulates the best reason for designing authentic writing assignments for students in "A Cure for Writer's Block: Writing for Real Audiences": "Students writing for real audiences are motivated in a way that students churning out papers for grades [or standardized assessment] are not... What it all comes to is this: if what you are writing has no possibility of making a difference, of reaching a real audience for real purposes, then there will be no investment in the work" (121, 123).

A writing classroom should be a dynamic place of growth, discussion, development, synthesis, and change for both teachers and students. It should be a place for experimentation. It should be an environment that welcomes self-reflection and analysis. The writing classroom should challenge students to think in new ways, conceive of audiences, and identify issues that matter to them. Authentic writing helps students cultivate their unique voices.

**Works Cited**


Lori A. S. Kixmiller has taught composition at the high school and college levels for five years. She also serves as a teacher consultant for the Illinois State Writing Project and is a member of the Illinois Association of Teachers of English. email: mrs_kixmiller@hotmail.com.

---

**EJ 40 Years Ago**

**In Search of Fresh Topics**

Students do not necessarily write best about what they experience directly. I am told by a reliable authority that a young English teacher in New England’s most progressive state recently asked a class to write about their first sex experiences. Naturally, such things are frowned upon in the curriculum as obvious infringements on the domain of the *Ladies Home Journal* and the other pious pornographers. But the teachers should be forever in search of fresh topics, wherever they are at any time.