

# Encouraging Student Voice in Academic Writing

*Using "Writer's Notebooks," Rebecca Gemmell's students are able to engage personal opinions in their literary essays. The students write with more zeal, resulting in more enjoyable reading for their teacher.*

## The Problem: Bored Students, Boring Papers

At the end of each school day, I would dutifully pack my twelfth graders' British Literature essays into my canvas workbag and cart them from my English classroom to my car to my house and then back again. All the while, the essays remained unread. I would find any excuse to put off reading those papers: cleaning the toilet, picking up my dog's poop, talking to a telemarketer.

English teachers have to read student essays, of course. Having taught for ten years, I knew this and eventually I'd buckle down and grade them. But as a fellow of the San Diego Area Writing Project (SDAWP), a supposedly "good" writing teacher and writer myself, I was supposed to look forward to reading students' work, not dread it. I definitely had a problem.

What frustrated me about the essays I was getting, and why I procrastinated reading them, was that they all sounded the same, not at

all like the lively, diverse group of students I enjoyed working with in my classroom in Escondido, California. Take Jacob, for instance. Here was a bright, articulate, witty young man whose papers read like cardboard. He did what I call "robot writing" in which he, like many students, parroted back everything I had said in class about *The Canterbury Tales* or *Macbeth*. I wanted to hear

what Jacob had to say, but I wasn't hearing his voice or ideas in his writing.

That was, until he wrote his paper on why he thought poetry was outdated and irrelevant. After an in-depth study of the Romantics, I asked students to read and respond to Bruce Wexler's essay "Poetry Is Dead. Does Anybody Care?" in an effort to incorporate more nonfiction and argumentative writing into my British Literature course. Jacob's poetry paper was different from the rest of his work—it was a pleasure to read. In this paper, I could hear the witty boy who sat in the first row on my left, the boy with whom I enjoyed joking and with whom I debated theories about the TV show *Lost*. In fact, he made reference to *Lost* in his paper. He knew he could get me, his reader, with a reference to *Lost* because, in reality, I would rather watch *Lost* than read poetry, too, just as he was trying to argue. In this paper, Jacob finally had something to say and he was aware of how to persuade his audience, making a difference in the content of his paper.

Intuitively I knew I was onto something. What I had found with Jacob held true with many of my other students. In general, I got more passionate and convincing arguments from students when I asked them to write about their connections and reactions to texts and their themes rather than when I asked them to write about character analysis, tone, and symbolism, for example.

At the same time, I worried whether I was doing the right thing for my students. After all, wasn't English all about literary analysis, as per the Advanced Placement (AP) exam? That is what other English teachers in my department were focusing

**Here was a bright, articulate, witty young man whose papers read like cardboard. He did what I call "robot writing" in which he, like many students, parroted back everything I had said in class.**

on, particularly style analysis. Literary analysis essays were what I had written in high school and in college as an English major. I wanted students to be prepared for college.

### Changing My Approach: Putting Students' Ideas First

My fears were allayed when I joined the California Writing Project's (CWP) Improving Students' Academic Writing (ISAW) program. The goal of ISAW, which began in 1999, is to improve the achievement of nontraditionally college-bound students, such as minority and second language students, through teacher professional development.

As part of the ISAW program, students routinely practice writing to prompts from the University of California's placement exam, the Analytic Writing Placement Exam (AWPE), formerly the Subject A Exam. The exam requires students to read a short nonfiction selection and then respond to the reading. The prompt directs students to (1) discuss the author's ideas, and (2) discuss the extent to which the exam taker agrees with the author. Students may draw on their personal experiences and observations as well as the reading itself to support their views.

When I learned that the UC system measures students' readiness for college-level writing by asking them to express their opinion and that personal experience could be a major source of evidence, I felt empowered to follow my initial hunch and encourage student voice in academic writing. Students should respond to authors' ideas, I came to learn, *especially* if we are preparing them for college. According to a survey conducted by the University of California, "College faculty assign writing to get to know how students think, to help students engage critically and thoughtfully with course readings, to demonstrate what students understand from lectures, to structure and guide their inquiry, to encourage independent thinking, and to invite them into the on-going intellectual dialogue that characterizes higher education" (5). College students are expected to respond to others' ideas and express their own. As Gerald Graff and Cathy Birkenstein explain in their book *They Say, I Say: The Moves That Matter in Academic Writing*, the purpose of college-level writing is to enter into conversations about academic topics and issues (ix).

As a result of the new understanding, I boldly banished traditional literary analysis papers that asked students, for example, to analyze Macbeth as a tragic hero, a move that raised a few eyebrows in my department. But being part of ISAW, a statewide inquiry initiative, gave me the confidence and authority to proceed. I wanted my seniors to be truly prepared for college, so I invited them to share their beliefs about the topics and issues the literature we studied raised. And I never looked back. I modeled my study questions and writing assignments after the AWPE prompts. I put students' ideas front and center.

For the students this approach was a major departure from their previous English experiences.

In surveying my students, I found that 55% described my English class as distinctly different from their other English classes. "We have always learned to write about the author's opinion and not give our own. Oh but how that changed," Jeff explains in his end-of-the-year reflection. Many students described their other classes as book-focused and senior year as opinion-focused. Matt states, "In this class, we did not always write about books and their underlying meanings. We wrote about real issues and gave our opinions on them."

**Surprisingly, in the beginning at least, many students resisted this new focus. I assumed they would love the opportunity to express their opinions in their formal essays. In reality, they didn't want to have to think that hard.**

Surprisingly, in the beginning at least, many students resisted this new focus. I assumed they would love the opportunity to express their opinions in their formal essays. In reality, they didn't want to have to think that hard. They wanted me to tell them what to write. It was easier that way. And it was what they were used to. They didn't believe that it was OK to express their opinion in an "academic" essay. They'd been taught that there was no place for personal opinion, only analysis. The shift in focus was especially difficult for students who had previously been in honors and AP classes.

### Using the Writer's Notebook

A turning point was the introduction of the Writer's Notebook at the beginning of second semester.

I got the idea to use a Writer's Notebook after seeing a presentation, led by Bill Martin, about Occasional Papers (OPs), a kind of reflective essay, at the 2006 NCTE Annual Convention in Nashville. The presenters discussed how writing OPs and sharing them aloud helped create a sense of community and sparked discussion in their classrooms, exactly the kind of "social, conversational act" academic writing is meant to generate in the college classroom (Graff and Birkenstein ix). I wanted to validate the use of personal anecdotes and observations in my academic class and I was inspired by the kinds of discussions OPs generated. The proverbial wheels began to turn.

I had had success in using Writer's Notebooks, the kind Ralph Flercher advocates, with my

creative writing students and thought they might work in my British Literature classes, with some adaptations, in the same way OPs had worked in Bill Martin's classes. I wanted students to see their Notebooks as a safe place to explore topics freely without worrying about correctness, but the topics needed to be tied to our studies. I needed students to think about the issues being raised in the literature as a way

to engage with the texts and to make connections. I also wanted students to return to their entries to generate ideas for their formal essays. And so we began the Writer's Notebook, academic style.

**I wanted students to think critically and to share their perspectives through their writing. And I shared mine. I wrote every day along with the students to model the kind of thinking and writing I wanted to foster.**

### The Prompts

Students wrote daily in their Notebooks on assigned prompts. Sometimes they wrote before we read a selection; other times they wrote after. On good days they wrote before and after! For example, when studying the concept of heroism and reading *Beowulf* and nonfiction pieces about heroism, students answered prompts such as the following:

- Explain what it means to be a hero. What makes someone a hero? What kinds of things do heroes do? Give an example to illustrate your point.
- Describe someone you look up to and/or admire. Why do you admire him or her?

What does your admiration of this person say about you?

- Americans seem obsessed with celebrities. What role does fame play in who people admire?
- Is there a difference between admiring someone and someone being a hero? Defend your opinion.
- Do you think the definition of a hero has changed over time or are there some heroic qualities that are universal? Why do people and cultures need heroes?

The prompts were designed to call into question some of the students' initial ideas about heroism, especially everyday heroes, and to help them think about the bigger idea of heroes' roles in society. These were more than simple quickwrites to tap students' prior knowledge before reading. I wanted students to think critically and to share their perspectives through their writing. And I shared mine. I wrote every day along with the students to model the kind of thinking and writing I wanted to foster.

These informal writing assignments and the discussions they spurred prepared students to then answer more challenging academic questions, such as "Write an essay in which you define heroism and reflect on the role of heroes in society and individual lives." This question requires students to respond to the readings, to take a position, and back it up with evidence from the various texts as well as examples from their personal experiences or personal observations. Because they've already thought about their experiences and made connections to the ideas expressed in the texts, students would now be able to respond to the question with interesting insights and unique perspectives. There were no cookie-cutter responses here. Take a look at Christopher's conclusion to the Heroism essay:

From parents to an NFL superstar, heroes help mold others. And once again, a hero is more than someone who risks their life doing a courageous act but someone who impacts another deeply. Heroes help keep us on a more optimistic track. We tend to want to be heroic so we try and act selfless or become a role model. Heroes play a huge role in society because without them we would prove Thomas Hobbes, a political philosopher who said people are evil amongst each other, right.

And unlike Beowulf we do not need to slay diabolical dragons or risk our lives, but instead just be a positive impact on someone's life.

Because of our extensive work in the Notebook around this topic, Christopher was able to say something intelligent and interesting about *Beowulf* and the idea of heroism. And he wasn't the only one who was able to say something. When challenged to take a position on a universal idea, such as heroism, and do more than simply regurgitate why Beowulf is an epic hero, my students excelled. They had an argument they were invested in.

### Sharing Notebook Entries

In the spirit of OPs, students read and discussed what they wrote about in their Notebooks. Students were required to share at least one entry every six weeks. If they wanted to share more than that, they would earn extra credit. They could also earn participation points by commenting on the ideas raised in their classmates' entries. As with the OPs, sharing students' writing led to lively discussions that prompted a rich exchange of ideas, ones students often recorded and came back to when writing their essays. "When I would get stuck in an essay and didn't know what else to say, I would turn to my journal and find something that I wrote that related to the topic," Thomas writes.

I did have a few students who completed their daily entries but didn't want to share their writing with the class and who would not join in the debates despite their classmates' and my enthusiastic prodding. However, these students were more the exception than the rule.

Then there was Adam. He slept through the entire first semester but seemed to make a change second semester when I introduced the Notebook. He began completing his Notebook assignments and participated in our class discussions. I thought to myself, *This is it. The Notebook is the magic assignment that even motivates the unmotivated!* Alas, the Notebook was not the cure-all I had hoped it was. Adam still did not complete his take-home essays, which meant he would not pass the class. I also know that the Notebook did not mean as much to him as it did to the other students. He was the only one who gave me his Notebook to keep when I asked to have anyone's that was headed for the trash once the last bell of the school year rang. Was I dis-

heartened? No, because when I looked inside, I saw all the work that he produced in his Notebook, more work, I am sure, than in any other English class (at least in mine up to that point). I saw that the entries got longer and more thoughtful over the course of the semester. He had at least made some progress.

### Showing Improvement

Most of the students made measurable progress. Compared to their October pretests, on their May post-tests, my students

- Wrote thesis statements that presented a clear stance.
- Used personal experience and observations as evidence to bolster their arguments.
- Showed awareness of their audience. They worked to hook their readers by beginning with personal anecdotes and quotations.
- Saw the bigger purpose of writing—to effectively communicate their ideas and opinions and to engage with the ideas in the text.

When asked what assignments and/or activities helped them improve their writing the most, my students cited Notebooks (59%) and the discussions they prompted (63%) as the top two activities. As Melissa explains: "Before, writing was always about concrete details, analyzing, and summarizing. I never felt like my opinion mattered. British Literature taught me just the opposite. I learned how to present my opinion in an organized manner, and provide evidence to back it up. I learned what it meant to be passionate about writing and how to connect the prompt to personal experiences. I know how to include my opinion and express myself with confidence."

### Changing More Than Students' Writing

Several students also noticed that Notebooks and discussions changed the class atmosphere. By reading, writing, and talking together, we created a community of learners. Katherine states, "Our class became a whole because of the Notebooks." Jennifer echoes Katherine's ideas: "Coming up with the Writer's Notebook was an excellent way to get to know the rest of our classmates as well as our teacher on a more personal basis."


For many students, however, the Notebook and discussions had an even more important effect—they changed their attitude toward the class and writing. Several students' self-confidence and self-image also began to change. Jill writes: "After this year I honestly do feel better about my writing, which is very surprising for me to say because I used to hate writing essays. I felt as if I was not good enough to write them. But now I have more confidence and a better outlook on writing essays. . . . I think 12th grade was the best year I had in English." Having the opportunity to write daily in their Notebooks about their personal experiences and the readings and to discuss what they and their classmates thought provided a safe, supportive environment for students, especially insecure students like Jill, to tackle tough academic tasks.

### A Solution? You Bet!

What more could English teachers ask for than to have their students find success and joy in learning about literature? That's easy: exciting, engaging essays to read.

While I still separate students' essays into stacks of ten to make reading them seem less daunting, I no longer feel the sense of dread that I once felt in sitting down to a pile of papers. Now I sit

down to read students' work, pencil in hand, and I know I will find insightful comments about and connections to the texts we have read. I will get to learn about students' views on life and whether they consider themselves optimists or pessimists when we read poems from William Blake's *Songs of Innocence and Experience*. I will get to learn about social and political organizations like Invisible Children and how I can get involved with their causes when we study Jonathan Swift's *A Modest Proposal*.

Putting students' ideas and opinions at the center of our classroom has freed students' voices. They know that I care about what they have to say, and in turn, they care more about what they write. They produce better writing—writing that sounds like them and that I enjoy reading. 

### Works Cited

- Graff, Gerald, and Cathy Birkenstein. *They Say/I Say: The Moves That Matter in Academic Writing*. New York: Norton, 2005.
- Intersegmental Committee of the Academic Senates. "Academic Literacy: A Statement of Competencies Expected of Students Entering California's Public Colleges and Universities." Spring 2002. 1 August 2008 <<http://www.californiawritingproject.org/Documents/ISAW/AcademicLiteracy.pdf>>.
- Martin, Bill. "A Writing Assignment/A Way of Life." *English Journal*, 92.6 (2003): 52–56.
- Wexler, Bruce. "Poetry Is Dead. Does Anybody Care?" *Newsweek*, 5 May 2003: 18.

As an English and dance teacher at Escondido High School, **Rebecca Gemmell** shows great passion for motivating students to express themselves. She also promotes teacher voice as a leader in the San Diego Area Writing Project and she may be reached at [rgemmell@euhsd.k12.ca.us](mailto:rgemmell@euhsd.k12.ca.us). This manuscript was written with support from both the California and National Writing Project.

### READWRITETHINK CONNECTION

Traci Gardner, RWT

Tap students' "own connections and reactions to texts and themes" by asking them to review texts that they read. "So What Do You Think? Writing a Review" asks students to produce reviews of the literature they're reading in class—and to compare their ideas with the work of published reviewers. With their "ideas and opinions at the center of [the] classroom," students are encouraged to develop authentic and authoritative voices that make reading their work a pleasure. [http://www.readwritethink.org/lessons/lesson\\_view.asp?id=876](http://www.readwritethink.org/lessons/lesson_view.asp?id=876)