

Writing—That's the Real Test

If we want to see what students are really capable of in the language arts, we need to look more closely at their writing: their *real* writing, for *real* reasons, for a *real* audience.

In 25 years, I have never *taught to the test* (outside a 45-minute crash course on terminology and strategy). My disdain for the absurdity of many of the tests we give began with a muskrat. My colleagues and I opened the state test we were to administer to our students the next day. There was a picture of two muskrats, one dressed as a female, one dressed as a male. Both held champagne glasses. The female was posed seductively on a blanket. The male muskrat was standing over her, the champagne glass raised in his paw. In the background, high on a hill, was a castle. The prompt to our eighth graders was, "Create a story based on this picture. Ask yourself, 'What do you think will happen next?'" We were appalled. How could a picture that was blatantly anthropomorphic, smacked of alcohol, and hinted at sexual possibilities show what our kids were capable of as writers? We cut the picture out, gave our students blank paper, and asked them to "Write about anything you care deeply about. Try to convince the reader how much you care." We complied with the other conditions.

Ours was not the best prompt. Our students' tests were not scored. We were not fired. Writing samples disappeared. Starting this year, however, our eighth graders will again be asked to write to a prompt. I will still not teach to the test, but I will do several things to better prepare them for this particular kind of writing. I will:

- Immerse them in reading and writing every day so they can practice writing, so they are not afraid of any kind of writing, and so they can begin to recognize good writing in their reading;
- Give them models of scored tests as a genre unto itself, taken from the state as examples of the kind of writing they are looking for (found on most state education department Web sites), helping students define the characteristics they recognize in these pieces (an idea I learned from Nancie Atwell);
- Ask students to write case histories of the writing they choose to take to final draft, so that they think about their own processes as writers and what makes them successful at crafting a piece of writing;
- Talk to students individually about their writing as they draft their pieces, pointing out what they did well, asking legitimate questions as a reader, and giving one of two suggestions that focus on making that writing stronger;
- Give students whole-class craft lessons that focus on the various traits that make for effective writing, guiding them to look at their own writing in light of these lessons.

I submit to these writing tests because it is required, but I still wonder how anyone can design one prompt that engages *all* students? Yes, the writing prompts have become a bit more thoughtful, a bit more interesting, occasionally more sensible—but that's not good enough. If our students must take a writing test, then why not give them some choices of topics and genre? At

least three of each so there would be a greater likelihood that each student could write seriously about his or her real thoughts, beliefs, or feelings. One prompt may offer ease of scoring, but it tells us little about what our students are truly capable of as writers.

Good writing comes from creativity, imagination, and passionate beliefs, feelings, opinions, questions. Good writing comes from caring enough to craft it to the best of one's ability. If we don't give kids ways to connect to that writing, and time to craft their thinking, we will get what we ask for: mediocrity.

In addition, why not ask students to submit a process paper that explains how they moved from one draft to the next—their thinking on their thinking, their problems, their solutions, their strengths, their goals for the piece. What made this easy or hard? And speaking of hard, why are we asking kids to write these samples by hand? The only time the real world asks us to write in longhand is for our signature. Testing the writing of our students, without giving all kids access to computers on which to take these assessments, is simply unfair.

One Student

This year Alden has written (a partial list):

- Personal narratives (his grandmother's inability to quit smoking; mother's depression)
- Book reviews (Rick Reilly's *Who's Your Caddy?* *The Life of Reilly*)
- Twelve comparison/contrast essays on current events from newspaper
- Essay (capitalism as a fair economic system; two admissions essays on given topic)
- Fictional stories ("Running through Time," and "Scuba Steve and the Lost Flippers"; fictional journal of trip to Haiti for French class)
- Research Papers (health report on depression; science paper with the hypothesis "Paper dipped in different liquids will burn at different rates.")

- Informational pamphlets (Depression; The Dogwinkle: Thais lapillus)
- Resume (Objective: admission to Phillips Exeter Academy)
- Satirical op-ed pieces (after studying Rick Reilly as a mentor author: "A Season to Remember: The NHL"; "Big Mouth Brown")
- Four quarterly and one end-of-year self-evaluations
- Letter (to Terrence Green about his book *Blue Limbo*)

"When I was two years old my parents separated and by the time I was four, they were legally divorced. I have scattered memories of fake smiles and long months without my mother, but I didn't care back then. I care now. Your book *Blue Limbo* brought back all the memories, and I am thankful that you wrote it. . . ."

- Process papers for each final draft of writing

In assembling all this writing from his last year in eighth grade, Alden wrote, "I did not realize how patient I have become as a writer. In one of my pieces that I made toward the end of the year, there are about five drafts of the piece, each draft going through many changes. . . . It amazed me seeing how much writing I actually did this year. . . . Finally I have noticed that I am a good writer. I have always thought of writing as something I did not like to do, and something that I wasn't good at. I have realized that a lot of my pieces are very good, and that I am proud of them. At the beginning of the year I never thought that I would say that, but this collection has changed the way I think about writing, and I can now say, for a fact, that I enjoy writing."

If we want to know what our kids are really capable of as writers, then we have to give them the conditions under which that writing can happen. Alden was given those conditions. He produced a collection of real writing, for real reasons, for a real audience. Because it mattered, it became good writing. He is ready for that test.