

# Expressivity and Voice: A (Pre)Writing Strategy Revisited

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Writing teachers may sometimes meet students who come to class with little preparation to write and require more assistance. At least once a semester, I encounter students who either struggle initially, but progress over time after multiple class exercises and teacher conferences or students who drop the course because their writing portfolios do not demonstrate satisfactory levels of performance. I am certain most writing teachers in both secondary and post-secondary education do their best to get ready to meet their students' varying needs before classes begin, but can we really predict our student population every school year? Even as I start my 25th year teaching college writing this fall (yes, quarter-of-a-century on a global pandemic), I am still surprised by the mixture of students I end up working with. If we have more student writers who struggle this semester, where do we begin?

The COVID-19 pandemic has not only brought a global health crisis, but also posed major challenges for educators around the world to re-assess effective instructional strategies in person, remotely, and online. Writing teachers in particular need to verify different types of classroom activities are still being implemented across contexts to enhance the writing process and help struggling writers get connected. I have had to be more mindful and deliberate when planning for my course activities this fall, making sure that I give students the opportunity to engage both individually and collaboratively at certain junctures of their writing whether we are in a hyflex (in-person and remote), fully remote/synchronous, or fully online/asynchronous environment. Because of our new normal, we all need to be more creative and dynamic in the classroom. Admittedly, there is no exact formula for teaching writing due to its changing rhetorical contexts, purpose, and audience. I know teachers already apply diverse teaching strategies, from highlighting disciplinary content to guiding students throughout the writing processes, but some written products need more support. This drawback

alone behooves us to explore other techniques to maximize student learning and “revisit prerequisite skills in the context of instruction” (“Teaching During COVID-19,” 2020, p. 5). In some cases, the process approach to teaching writing is all it takes to allow our student writers the time and space to think iteratively, connect socially, and draft/revise purposefully (CCCC, 2020). But we also need to critically temper our instructional decisions now that classroom contexts have changed, so we don't compromise student learning (Nelson, 2020; Mahmood, 2020).

In this vein, I'd like to revisit the process of prewriting that has led many composition teachers (and teachers-in-training) to modified classroom practices. This preliminary activity has opened up a myriad of possibilities in teaching writing for secondary education and first-year college students, particularly in the conduct of expressive writing at the prewriting level. Originated by composition scholars like Murray (1968) and Macrorie (1970), expressive writing is an initial writing task, such as “freewriting, journal keeping, reflective writing” (Burnham, 2001, p. 19) or “writer-based prose” (Flower, 1979, p. 19), that focus on the delivery of one's personal thoughts regardless of standard forms and correctness. Its goal is for both novice and advanced writers to set preliminary ideas in motion, so I propose the re-application of expressive writing to mitigate our students' composition issues and recognize their voices.

## Application

When teaching high school and first-year college writing, we might want to re-consider expanding the usability of writer-centric activities in our classes. Writing teachers should not only become more vigilant with innovative curricular designs, but also re-examine best practices that may be remediated in newer contexts. The following are some suggestions to elevate the stature of expressive writing as a viable learning task.

## **Assign prewriting tasks where students intentionally produce expressive writing.**

When teachers encourage more expressive writing as frequent in-class exercises, students are more inclined to appreciate their own authority as writers. They tend to revise personal prose in the form of journals, blogs, or diaries with more investment on the text as opposed to transactional writing. Similarly, expressive practices are more liberating without the pressures of a finished product that may limit prewriting experiences. Elbow (1987) suggests that during prewriting, students must “not think more about readers but to think more for [themselves], to practice exploratory writing in order to learn to engage in that reflective discourse so central to [the] mastery of the writing process” (p. 57). Based on my experience, most students do not know how to clarify their thoughts since they were not given the chance to, first of all, clarify things for themselves. And they can only do so if they purposefully go writer-focused in the preliminary stages of writing.

One of these prewriting tasks is to integrate computer-mediated communication (CMC) into writing assignments, such as journals, blogs, and other freewriting activities.

CMC can be used for online journals. You can ask students to post journals a few times per week. You may assign journal topics or encourage students to post messages on a topic of their own choosing. Such online journals can be used not only to promote reflection on class material but also to help students see that they are in certain respects not alone (Blythe, 2003, pp. 122-23).

These types of informal writing assignments could foster writer-centric thinking at full length, helping student writers become more engaged and master the composing process. The utility of online discursive forums also affords the impetus for students to get in the habit of prewriting, display a source of enrichment, and bring stronger impact on communication patterns with avenues for brainstorming, planning, and so on. In this respect, blogging may be seen as a prewriting task that enables writers to openly express preliminary ideas about a topic or reading assignment and possibly turn them into small increments of a larger project.

Another variety is to ask students to keep a “box-logic” (Sirc, 2004) or a compilation of song lyrics or literary passages, a scrapbook, a virtual box, a blog, etc. where they get to actively take part in the

process of selection, retention, combination, and meaningmaking (See Figure 1). This prewriting task may be informal as long as they can draw meaning from their collections:

- It's the idea of the prose catalogue.
- Text as a collection of interesting, powerful statements.
- A kind of daybook or artist's notebook.
- The way I myself work -- jotting notes on the fly, sound-bite aperçus that sound good by themselves but can also become workable bits in a larger structure.
- A basic compositional tool; a medium I feel my students (who are certainly capable of interesting stretches of prose) could work well within. (Sirc, 2004, p. 112)

Sirc (2004) defines box-logic through the equation “text as box = author as collector” (p. 117). The student here becomes a collector of interesting quotes, visuals, etc. and comes up with something meaningful from his/her assemblage, similar to scrapbooking a personal memoir. Keeping flexibility and creativity in mind, instructors may assign Sirc's box-logic tasks (2004) below to help students reflect on a topic more meaningfully:

- search for visual/s that interest/s you (e.g. you may pull from Google images) and “talk about ideas evoked from the pictures, why [you] feel drawn to them, what message [you] hold for them....”
- look for verbal or aural texts using any search engine in relation to your selected topic/s
- juxtapose your favorite quotes and images using the ‘insert’ function of any word processing software and “write [your] own expressive commentary, reflecting on what the juxtaposed texts mean to [you]...., and artfully integrate it into the work.... (p. 131)

This variance of expressive writing will draw enough interest to help students move forward and indulge in their private thoughts during prewriting. The freedom to collect ideas at their discretion could empower novice writers, knowing they may operate on their own choices and values for future reference. Acquiring enough materials that are customized to drive our students' passion is also an essential component of the process that writing teachers might want to prioritize. Figure 1 illustrates two box-logic examples from a previous writing class:

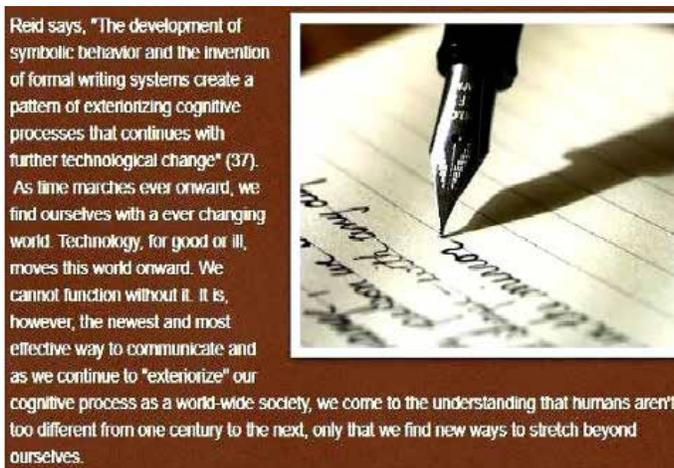
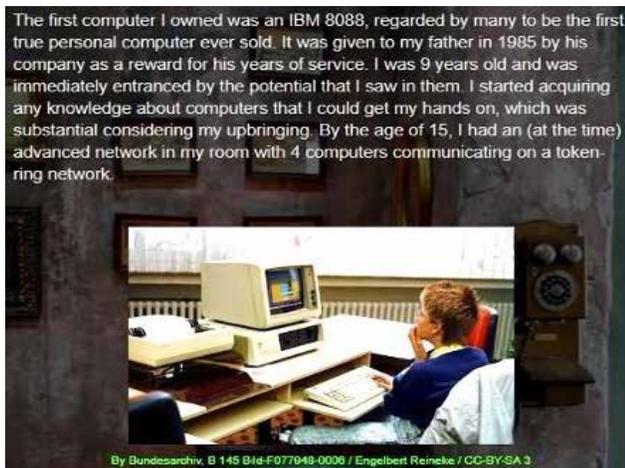


Figure 1. Box-Logic Examples

**Create collaborative venues for students to develop their own voice by assigning expressive writing exercises in class discussions, small-group dialogues, and so forth.**

We need to acknowledge that some students have difficulty writing because they are unsure how to express themselves or what to write about. So I tend to build different types of interaction in class for student engagement during prewriting, including student-to-student interaction, student-to-instructor interaction, and/or student-to-content interaction. These types of interaction and discussion activities, whether face-to-face or online, will help student writers process not only much-needed disciplinary information but also develop rhetorical strategies and writing styles. Such an approach calls for variety to enhance the prewriting process as well as use applicable writing technologies in the classroom (e.g., discussion boards, course blogs).

Adapted and modified from an experiment in Schweiker-Marra & Marra (2000), I have used the following learning strategies to encourage students to articulate their prewriting ideas individually and collaboratively in stages:

- **Instructor-to-class interaction:** Introduce a writing assignment to the class and brainstorm possible topics by clustering or listing ideas on the board. These initial thoughts may be messy -- that's totally fine.
- **Student-to-content interaction:** Each student chooses one or two topic/s and freewrites or engages in an expressive writing activity for about 15-20 minutes. No need to think about structure, organization, or grammar at this-

point -- just jot down preliminary ideas even if they don't make any sense.

- **Student-to-student interaction:** Students share their freewriting or expressive writing with their partners (or group) while everyone withholds any critique or judgment. Instead, partners (or groups) must help the writer identify a topic's purpose and target audience.
- **Student-to-instructor interaction:** Students may set a meeting with the instructor if they need personal help on how to gather and organize ideas, such as "storymapping, comparing and contrasting, using three-point paragraph," etc. (Schweiker-Marra & Marra, 2000, p. 113). Student writers who require the most assistance would normally avail of this interaction or teacher conferences.

Another approach entails whole-class discussion of reading assignments to promote the concept of reading-into-writing. Here, students may keep Sirc's (2004) box-logic as an alternate venue to uniquely reflect on what they have read. They may choose a favorite picture, a song, a poem, or anything that comes to mind after reading an article. Then, they may share these raw connections to the group, come up with their own interpretations, and use writer-centric prose to freely express their idiosyncrasies or what they really feel, what they really think. Group expressive writing activities such as these invite honesty that can be a powerful tool for validation (Bisseker Bar, 2018; Sommers, 2020). Honesty is an underrated writing attribute and teachers must encourage students to practice truthfulness in expressing their voice about a text to others without reservations.

## **Coach students how to transform expressive writing to something more reader-based with authority.**

What happens here is that writers are trained to extend their communication base in order to include the cognitive needs of another reader other than themselves (Flower, 1979). As we rely on expressive writing for authentic voices to emerge, we also teach students how to apply audience awareness. The idea is for them to make full use of expressive writing to explore topics, assume a strong voice, and transform their prose for the benefit of target readers. At certain points, thinking about audience, purpose, and context would generate relevant ideas and extend the groundwork that has already been laid out.

To realize the transfer between expressive writing activities and other forms of writing, students may be given revision pointers to help them take their next steps. Whether the final product is a business letter, an academic essay, or a traditional research paper, writing instructors may introduce the same applications to enable the development of prewriting notes. If students were to write a specific type of business letter, I'd ask them to focus on the different parts of that letter to guide their prewriting and revisions. If they were to compose an argumentative essay, students need to come up with possible reasons during prewriting to support their position and use the essay format to finalize their draft. If they were to write a research paper, their prewriting notes may hit on preliminary ideas with the thesis statement pulling the whole paper together after peer reviews. Here is a list of classroom exercises from Chunyi's (2020) blended teaching procedure that I have adapted to transform my students' expressive writing to final drafts:

- help students figure out the general organization [of their draft];
- guide the possible direction to the topic [for focus];
- train them how to evaluate their peers' writing product [from writer-centric to reader-based prose];
- finish writing task. (p. 79)

These guided practices are mostly done in a writer's conference, but I also integrate them as mini-lessons in class. For example, I may show a journal or blog post and ask students to help me re-structure its ideas in an organized paper with cohesion, unity, and emphasis. I have also noticed that if I go over the organization of a published

work in class (e.g., essay, report, journal article, etc.), student writers seem to effectively emulate the structural techniques in their own writing while maintaining their voice.

Admittedly, the challenge is for students to become engaged writers with constant feedback. Some writing assignments are cumulative that build toward a final writing project, so coaching students may be required via formative/ungraded evaluations if only to polish organic, prewriting ideas. From a learner-centered standpoint to teaching writing, the administration of student-teacher writing conferences is key for writers to hear other perspectives before taking the next step. Even peer reviews of preliminary works may lead to interesting directions, and adapting this active learning method will bring about improved student reflections, generation of new ideas, and more frequent collaboration. This plan also denotes an iteration of the recursive process of writing.

## **Reflection**

The nature of expressive writing (Murray, 1968; Macrorie, 1970) should be explored again pedagogically for the benefit of student success, especially as we reconfigure our instructional approach in the middle of a global pandemic. While underdeveloped, this type of prewriting may be repurposed as a tool for planning, organizing, and controlling student writing. It has helped my student writers examine a particular subject, solve problems, and accomplish writing assignments, showing traces of their busy minds at work over nuclear ideas on paper (or on the screen). The cognitive value of expressive writing is too easy to ignore unless teachers utilize it properly for more productive ends.

I have also noticed that though my students' prewrites may have displayed strings and sequences of sentences, their voices are often raw, their ideas authentic, and their works rife for improvement. Readers usually expect writers to provide connections and develop ideas, but such expectations are known to be cognitively demanding at the prewriting stage. Expressive writing practices inspire more writers to set their thoughts in motion, knowing they have the opportunity to receive coaching/feedback instead of grades. The chance to share preliminary ideas for purposes of expansion is identical to putting layers of building blocks to strengthen the framework of a house, an empowering tool for most writers. My students seem to have gained

much confidence in their voice and writing skills in the process as they were placed at the center of this activity.

To close, I tell students that prewriting is just a means to an end. Expressive writing teases out more ideas than anyone could hope for, especially if they know when to do it and how to use it to their advantage. But they must also learn how to revise writer-centric prose to avoid a barrage of interior monologues in final drafts. From this angle, the intersection of prewriting, expressivity, and voice is critical in helping writers overcome writing difficulties.

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