

WISE EYES

Prompting for Meaningful Student Writing

By Mary Ann Smith and Sherry Swain • Fall 2011 • National Writing Project

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Every teacher who has tried to create the “perfect” writing prompt knows how hard it is to come up with a topic and set of directions that will put students on the right track. Similarly, teachers know well the mischief that occurs when students run into a “bad” prompt, especially in a test situation. Confounding the challenge is the fact that students have minds, hearts, and experiences of their own and can interpret instructions in all kinds of ways.

Prompts do play a key role in student performance. In order of appearance on the writing stage, prompts are often first. If they are dull, indecipherable, or daunting, students may not be able to come up with their best composing act. Whether prompts are part of a teacher’s curriculum—assignments constructed to teach a particular something—or part of a test or evaluation, they are unavoidable.

In this monograph, we explore what it takes to frame a writing task that will motivate students and lead them to show off what they can really do. Our focus is on tasks that may not have the benefit of classroom support or scaffolding; for example, those intended to gauge the effectiveness of lessons, programs, or student accomplishments. That is, we want to understand how to design a writing prompt for situations when the teacher cannot otherwise elaborate on or repair the instructions.

The job of creating such a prompt is loaded with exasperating contradictions. How is it possible, for example, to provide clear, concise directions and at the same time give enough guidance so that students know what constitutes success? Is choice important? If so, how much and what kind? To what extent is it helpful to spell out audience and purpose? What do we mean by authenticity?

To address these perplexing issues and others, we have selected a variety of professionals—researchers, policymakers, and teachers—to weigh in on principles and practices that provide a basis for adopting, adapting, or designing effective prompts. In addition, we offer examples of promising prompts as well as those that limit students in some way.

General Considerations

We begin with two overviews. The first is adapted from a 1988 publication, *Designing Writing Tasks for the Assessment of Writing*, by Leo Ruth and Sandra Murphy. Phrased as questions, these considerations can guide the writing or adapting of a prompt, or serve to eliminate some prompts from the running:

- Is the topic potentially interesting to students?
- Do students have choice within the overall topic?
- Does the task challenge students' thinking appropriately?
- Does the topic allow students to access prior knowledge in their responses?
- Is the topic accessible? Do students have the requisite knowledge to understand the task and frame a response?
- Does the topic provide cues to help writers generate content without over-prompting?
- Does the task suggest an audience and purpose?
- Does the task indicate what a "satisfactory" or "complete" response might look like for the particular writing situation?
- Does the task engage students in cognitive processes such as reflection, analysis, and synthesis?
- To what extent is the task "authentic"?

“*The writing topic is a stimulus, a springboard....
But each writer uses that springboard differently
and performs uniquely.*”

Ruth and Murphy 1988

The second overview comes from *Writing Specifications for the 2011 National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP)*. While these new specifications were designed with a large-scale assessment in mind, they can also serve as guides for developing prompts on a less global level.

Summary of Key Content Specifications

Key Characteristics	
Guidelines for Content Development	<p>Tasks</p> <p>Tasks should:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Address real-world, and age- and grade-appropriate issues. • Be familiar and accessible to students, and not controversial in nature. • Allow choices within parameters provided by the writing task. • Draw upon students' experiences and observations. • Encourage the use of effective approaches to thinking and writing. • Occasionally include an external stimulus, such as a brief reading passage or an illustration, photograph, table, chart, or other visual representation.
	<p>Purpose</p> <p>Purpose should be:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Clearly stated in the writing task. • Consistent with the audience identified in the writing task.
	<p>Audience</p> <p>Audience should be:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Specified or clearly implied in the writing task. • Familiar and age- and grade-appropriate. • Consistent with the purpose identified in the writing task. • Varied depending on task complexity at each grade.
	<p>Form***</p> <p>Students should:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Choose the form most suitable to their purpose and audience at grades 8 and 12 (to be field-tested prior to the 2011 assessment). • Be asked to use a specified form at grade 4.

(ACT 2007, 44)

Source: U.S. Department of Education, Institute of Education Sciences, National Center for Education Statistics, National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP), National Assessment Governing Board, *Writing Specifications for the 2011 National Assessment of Educational Progress* [public domain].

*** After field-testing, the decision was made to specify form in the prompts at grades 8 and 12 as well as at grade 4.

While these overviews come from different sources and decades, they have several key points in common:

- The need for prompts to state a **purpose** and to specify or strongly imply an **audience**.
- The importance of **authenticity**—real-world credible topics.
- An emphasis on **accessibility**: age-appropriate tasks that are recognizable to students and offer a degree of choice.

Writing About Personal Experience

With these overviews as a reference point, our next step is to look closely at some key considerations and questions about what makes an effective writing prompt. At the top of the list is the notion that a prompt must be accessible to a wide range of students—that is, it must enable and motivate students to write with what Catharine Keech calls “intention.” For many young writers, the invitation to write about personal experience opens up a whole range of responses, while leveling the playing field by making the content as approachable and appealing as possible to most students. “When someone asks us what we would wish for most in the world, or what we recall that was happy or sad or surprising from our childhood, or whom we especially admire, we believe the questioner to be genuinely curious,” writes Keech. “We recognize this rhetorical situation from oral speech, and most of us welcome an invitation to explore our own minds or re-examine our experiences in conversation with a friendly listener. Unlike topics which require students to write about information which they believe the reader already has, the topics allow students to impart information which only they possess: on what they remember, what they think, how they feel they can write with authority” (Keech 1982, 140–142).

Keech reviews a number of possibilities:



Write about an experience you had during a family holiday which was particularly memorable. It may be happy or sad, but should be a time when you had strong feelings.

This prompt can evoke description, narration, commentary, or analysis, depending on the skill of the writer.



Tell about an experience from which you learned a lesson.

This prompt is most likely to inspire a narrative but may also elicit commentary and reflection.




Write about an object you are especially attached to, something that has deep personal meaning for you, something that has become a part of your life. You might want to consider the way you discovered it, the way it came into your life, the way it has taken on meaning through time.

This prompt is most likely to inspire a descriptive account.

Drawing on Personal Experience to Make a Point, Draw a Conclusion, or Convey Significance


To various degrees, the personal experience prompts above invite student writers to investigate and convey the “so what” or significance behind an event, a precious object, or a lesson learned. In these instances, writers use their experiences to think critically about their own lives and the lives of others. Prompts can also stretch students to use personal experience for a transactional purpose. For example, in 2008, Kentucky’s writing assessment asked eighth grade students to narrate an event to illustrate a point. Here is the sample writing task:



Situation:
In an effort to promote better relationships in the community, an entire issue of your local newspaper will be devoted to acts of kindness. These acts could include a student standing up for another student, someone helping his or her neighbor during a difficult time, or an individual volunteering to make someone’s life easier.

Writing task:
Write an editorial for the local newspaper about the importance of being kind to others. Tell about a time when you observed or participated in an act of kindness. Support your response with details or examples. (KDE 2008, 8)

This kind of writing task may elicit strong writing from older students as well. Edward M. White argues for inviting college students to use personal experience as illustration or proof of an idea. While he acknowledges that the use of personal experience in college writing is a subject of debate, White outlines several benefits. “It [personal experience] draws on immediately accessible material and detail, and can be engaging to students in ways that more abstract topics are not. Using the experience of the writer as evidence . . . is an effective way of teaching students how to use evidence to draw conclusions” (White 2007, 120). White submits the following prompt—also dealing with objects—for post-secondary students:



Many observers of our society claim that modern people, immersed in materialism, are “owned by their objects.” Yet many of us have objects that we treasure not just for their material value but for a variety of other reasons. Describe one object that is important to you. Explain what values it represents, and comment on those values.

What Teachers Say About Personal Experience Writing

In general, the teachers who participated in NWP's National Scoring Conference found that a well-crafted invitation to write from personal experience engages students and gives them an abundance of ideas for writing as well as ample room for reflection. However, they also proposed these qualifications:

- Teachers of English language learners caution that some students are reluctant to reveal details about their lives. Researchers agree: "Some students, particularly those from cultures in which self-expression is not valued in writing, may have difficulties with personal topics" (Weigle 2002, 92).
- In a similar vein, not all students have the life experiences to respond successfully to the full range of personal-experience prompts. Mississippi primary teacher Robin Atwood explains: "Any prompt with a broad theme—for example, a prompt that asks writers to think about the big picture or the large scheme of things—makes no sense to a young student. We don't want to penalize them for their lack of life experiences." In particular, Atwood found the following prompt—while potentially suitable for older students—beyond the reach of younger writers:

"New beginnings" can take many forms, such as a new school year, a new sports season, moving to a new home, or changing a habit. How has a new beginning affected you? Write a narrative about a time when you experienced a "new beginning."

- If we offer personal experience as the subject of a prompt, we need to "give kids something important to talk about." Otherwise, according to California middle school teacher Dale Lee, "the prompt invites students to write formulaically or just very superficially. We want to push students to look at significance and at what impacts their lives."

Writing to Persuade or Argue

The 2011 NAEP Writing Specifications give clear-cut guidelines for developing persuasive writing tasks (ACT 2007, 26):

To Persuade tasks should be designed to encourage critical thinking processes like analyzing, arguing, evaluating, and synthesizing. Task developers can enhance the potential for students to demonstrate depth and complexity by applying the following guidelines for development of *To Persuade* tasks:

- Create topics and issues open to a variety of approaches and perspectives and present these topics and issues as complex controversies (e.g., asking about high schools' responsibility for promoting healthy eating habits rather than simply asking whether junk food should be banned).
- Provide realistic persuasive scenarios that will enrich the writing situation and heighten the writer's awareness of audience.
- Use "cue words" appropriate for the age and grade that promote argumentative strategies (e.g., "propose," "consider how others...") rather than merely asking for an opinion (e.g., "Do you agree?").
- Include additional instructions that remind students of the criteria for a good persuasive response (e.g., "Support your opinion with specific examples") or that encourage them to focus on a specific component or problem of the task topic (Keech 1982).

Source: U.S. Department of Education, Institute of Education Sciences, National Center for Education Statistics, National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP), National Assessment Governing Board, *Writing Specifications for the 2011 National Assessment of Educational Progress* [public domain].

As useful as these NAEP approaches may be, the fact is that persuasive writing—the bread and butter of many writing assessments—is challenging on all fronts, from developing the right prompt to teaching students how to respond. In a testing situation, Keech reminds us, “the better-informed writer, the writer who has thought about an issue, is likely to produce more cogent arguments, more convincing examples to support his or her position or to explain his or her thesis” (Keech 1982, 155). What’s more, many students “shoot from the hip” when writing about hot topics and controversial issues—the very subject matter that engages and motivates them. Indeed, unconsidered and unsupported opinions are the bane of the writing teacher, along with their duller cousin, the formulaic five-paragraph essay.

One critical step in designing a prompt is to select a subject that invites possible and reasonable generalization. Ruth and Murphy remind us of a little-known report by John Dixon and Leslie Stratta (1981) that cites the kind of prompt that creates unintended stumbling blocks for a student writer:

Young people today have no individuality. They conform to the tastes and interests of their friends and seldom think for themselves. Do you agree?

Among the reasons this prompt is unsuccessful are:

- The proposition within the prompt is highly general, implying *all* young people.

- The proposition states a categorical truth about all young people.
- The proposition assumes students have sociological knowledge about young people today and how they might compare with those who preceded them.
- The invitation to agree or disagree unnecessarily constrains students.

Better examples, according to Dixon and Stratta, draw on personal experience and make possible a sensible generalization. In particular, successful models “start with small-scale generalizations rather than impossibly huge questions” (Ruth and Murphy 1988, 263):



You want to convince your parents that you should (or should not) take up a particular weekend job. What arguments would you put forth?

What Teachers Say About Persuasive Writing

Among the many prompts that showed up at the NWP National Scoring Conference was one that attracted the attention of the teacher-scorers because of the writing that resulted. It appeared originally in Indiana’s 2007 administration of statewide testing (ISTEP) for grade 10:



Summer Academy

Your state university is offering a residential summer academy to high school students who are interested in spending four weeks working and studying with professionals in the fields of:

- Art (Painting, Drawing, or Sculpture)
- Biology
- Computer Science
- English (Creative Writing)
- Physical Education
- Math (Problem Solving/Engineering)
- Music

The program includes living in a university dorm and working side-by-side with professionals in their actual workplaces. As part of the application process, you are required to identify what field you are interested in studying and what you hope to learn while you are attending the academy. Write a persuasive essay in which you state

why you should be selected for the academy. Clearly state the field that interests you, why you have selected that field to study, and what you hope to gain by participating in the program.

Sarah Hunt-Barron, Assistant Associate Professor of Education, Converse College, explains why this prompt stood out:

- Students had choice in the prompt of what area they wanted to study, which really allowed them to personalize their response.
- The prompt was authentic. Students could envision themselves applying for a summer program at a university. The prompt gave good cues about what was expected in an application essay. Some students wrote as though their essay were truly going to admissions personnel for a program. As a reader, I wanted to accept them!
- The prompt was personal. Students were writing about themselves and their strengths. Because they were talking about why they should be selected for a program, they could include both anecdotes from their own lives and other rhetorical strategies to persuade readers to admit them to the program.
- The application format of the prompt allowed students to move away from the five-paragraph essay. Students wrote both letters and essays, but these were less formulaic than we might typically see with prompted writing samples.

While no single prompt will inspire every student, this example illustrates the principles of authenticity and accessibility. The topic is age appropriate and potentially relevant. It asks students to perform a task (apply for a position or program) that one day, if not now, they will probably have to do.

Balancing Choice and Focus

Inviting students to select material within a designated set of parameters is one way to assure that the greatest proportion of writers can display their writing abilities. However, the extent to which students are allowed to make choices is a key consideration for writers of prompts. Giving students *carte blanche* seems problematic. With undefined topics, “a large part of the student’s energy available for writing must go into selecting, defining, and redefining a topic” (White 2007, 6).

Where do we draw the line, then, between choice that is helpful to a writer and choice that creates chaos or results in an ill-fated writing performance? The

California High School Exit Exam supplies an example of the delicate balance in this 2008 prompt:

If you could spend one day with an historical person or a fictional character, who would it be? What would you do during your day together? Where would you go? What would you talk about?

Write a narrative essay describing where you and this person would go and what you and this person would do. Be sure to use details and evidence supporting your ideas.

Certainly, this prompt allows for a great deal of choice. The questions serve to stimulate ideas, especially for the best writers. But for the less skilled, the questions could set off a list of short answers as demonstrated in this excerpt:

The things that I will ask Thomas Edison would be, how did he get an idea of inventing the light? The things that I would like to talk with him would have been like how did the light bulb changed peoples lifes? I know that he invented more things and not only the lightbulb.

In addition to the problem of answering questions, the student writer has a potentially overwhelming number of choices to make:

1. Should I write about an historical or a fictional character?
2. Who?
3. How would we spend a day?
4. Where would we go?
5. What would we do?
6. What would we talk about?
7. How would I describe all of the above?
8. What ideas should I write about?
9. What details and evidence should I select?
10. What verb tense should I use? (ELL students may face a particular disadvantage when they are set up to use conditional verb forms.)

The most fortunate and fluent writers can often bypass the zigzags in such a prompt by having in their hip pockets the name of a person about whom they are curious or knowledgeable and by using the prompt to display a plethora of detail. As Edward White points out about college-level assignments, "When a question is not clear, it becomes the student's responsibility to

construct a clear question and then answer it. This way of handling the question is never evident, and many students will respond . . . by simply dumping everything they know about the topic on the page in the hope that they will somehow hit on whatever the teacher is looking for” (White 2007, 31).

The issue of juggling student choice and clear direction was one subject of a 2001 NAEP/NWP study that looked at writing assessments and corresponding student writing. The study found that effective writing tasks attended to balance: “a range of choices for students’ focus was (should be) balanced with support and direction so that students could engage in the process as equal partners, rather than be directed to complete teacher-driven tasks” (Peterson 2001).

What Teachers Say About Balancing Choice and Focus

Teachers support choice. They want students to own the topic and write with authority and creativity. But they also want to save students from wandering down the primrose path, which was well traveled when students responded to the following prompt:

Sometimes it’s fun to imagine what the world would be like if you were in charge for a day. Be as crazy (vegetables taste like chocolate) or serious as you want in writing a persuasive essay paper about why it would be great if you were in charge of the world for a day.

California fifth grade teacher Teresa Pitta notes that many papers responded to this prompt with a “grocery list” of ideas. One way to establish a focus, she notes, is to “invite the student to pick one thing they might like to change and to explain why.”

Tennessee teacher Rachel Price concurs: “We have to think about how elusive the world is to a child, sometimes even to an older child. The prompt might help the writer define that world—your community, your school, your home—rather than asking the writer to consider the entire universe.”

And then there is the silliness factor. “When a prompt suggests that the writer be ‘as crazy or serious as you want,’ it does not help the writer ground their piece in real support,” says Dale Lee. “You wind up with support that is either nebulous, silly, or disconnected.” Lee also cautions that with the ELL writer, “the hypothetical nature of this prompt presents another challenge because it calls for the subjunctive verb tense—‘I would,’ ‘we would,’ ‘if I were’—making a response beyond the reach or skill level of many.”

Designating Audience and Purpose

The challenge of audience

First we turn to James Britton, architect of a language and learning theory that speaks to the issue of audience and, in so doing, illuminates the task of prompt writers. In Britton's schema, the poetic mode (stories, most poems, plays, novels, songs) appeals to a broad audience (humans in general), though poetic writing can narrow in on a more specific group of readers (e.g., readers of mysteries). In some sense, this kind of writing *performs* for the reader and gives writers the leeway to follow a philosophy of "If you write it, the audience will find it." On the other hand, transactional pieces—and here Britton is referring to pieces intended to inform, persuade, or explain—are more dependent on a particular audience. Because the purpose of transactional writing is to get something done by someone, a predetermined audience ranks high on the list of rhetorical features (Britton 1975, 81-85, 93-94).

Audience is a key component of the 2011 NAEP assessment: "In most writing tasks on the 2011 NAEP writing assessment, the intended audience should be explicitly stated" (ACT 2007, 38). However, also according to NAEP specifications, an implied audience is acceptable when the audience is obvious in the context of the topic or when it is not relevant to completing the task.

So is there a rule of thumb? What happens, particularly in the case of transactional writing, if there is no specified audience? Consider this 2007 prompt from the Arizona state test of writing (AIMS):

Going to the movies is a major source of entertainment for many students. Imagine that the only discount theater in your area is closing.

Write a persuasive essay in support of keeping the discount movie theater open.

While this prompt is clear and concise, students may suffer from having no one to persuade unless, as some students do, they make up an audience ("Dear Theater Owner") or have the skills to write successfully to a wall. As Keech explains, "When audience is specified in a writing task that provides a full rhetorical context and a clear purpose for writing, the effect is to create a more realistic writing problem" (Keech 1982, 183).

Occasionally a prompt that specifies an audience can backfire, according to Keech. In one case, "a letter to your principal about something you would like changed" resulted in poor writing. Depending on how the principal was

viewed—as a despot or friend—students either refused to write or selected trivial problems (Ibid., 185-186).

Another potential boomerang is an imaginary audience that “serves no purpose that would not be better served by a ‘real’ human audience” (Ruth and Murphy 1988, 272). Ruth and Murphy cite this prompt introduction as an example of what to avoid:

You have met a man from outer space who has landed on earth near your school playground. He can understand English, but he does not know anything about schools here on earth. Describe your school for him.

Perhaps the lesson here is to be as straightforward as possible in specifying or implying an audience for a particular task and to rein in attempts to be overly clever. In any case, student writers know that the man from space will not be the real reader of the paper, and, most probably, they understand that another earthly audience lurks in the background.

The challenge of purpose

Writing is similar to many open-ended activities that ask us to determine when we have adequately finished a task. In other open-ended arenas, we might ask “When do we have enough information to make this important decision?” or “When is this closet clean enough?” In writing, our question might be “When is this piece ready for publication?”

Unlike a computational problem in mathematics, a piece of writing is never really done. It may be due on a particular date or in a specific time frame, but it has no absolute finish line. The potential for revision is endless.

This unbounded nature of writing, according to senior managing partner, Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching, Paul LeMahieu, poses a conundrum for authors: how do I decide if and when my writing is acceptable? Adding to the challenge is the fact that in any authentic composing situation—one in which the task calls for an ambitious and complex response—there are multiple ways to approach and carry out the assignment. In this scheme of infinite possibilities, LeMahieu explains, “The only way for students to know when their writing is done or at least done well enough is when the task gives them a sense of the purpose for the writing and for what it must accomplish.”

“And once we start to understand the role of purpose in this way, we will get smarter about how to describe it, recognizing that purpose has a very particular job to do. That job goes beyond contextualizing a task, giving it

real-world interest, or engaging students in its authenticity” (LeMahieu 2010).

Often statements of purpose are limited to the very general goals of a particular genre. For example, the purpose of a persuasive piece is to convince a reader to adopt a position or to take some action. This prompt from the Kentucky Department of Education (KDE) attempts to go beyond the obvious by defining a purpose that might let fourth grade writers know what constitutes “good enough”—that is, the point at which the writer has addressed the task well enough to decide that it is finished.



Situation:

The local newspaper is having a “Good Friend” contest. To enter your friend, you must think of an event in your life when your friend did something with you or for you that showed what a terrific friend he or she is.

Writing Task:

Select your friend. (Remember, a friend could be a child your age or a grownup.) Choose an event that shows how your friend is a good friend to you. Write a letter to the newspaper that tells about that event so that people will know why your friend deserves to win. (KDE 2007, 10)

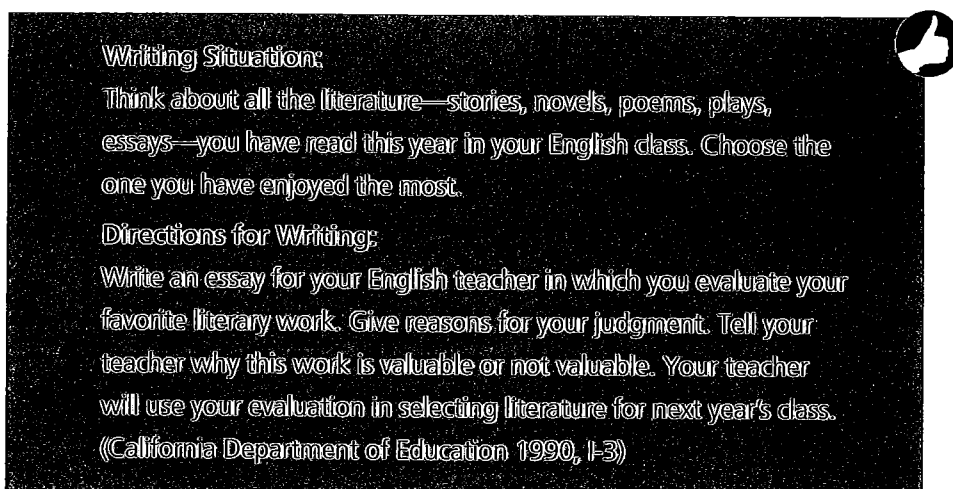
The prompt as written comes closer to giving students the information about purpose they need, according to LeMahieu. In order to respond successfully in this instance, students need to select the right event, a choice that may rest on their notion of what makes a good citizen. Success may also depend on students knowing what will happen to the writing and what decisions will be made, by whom, and how. In other words, the purpose for the task must go beyond simply conveying the context for the writing. “More than this,” LeMahieu explains, “it needs to provide a basis for students to determine whether or not they have fulfilled the intended task.”

An Approach to Identifying Audience and Purpose: Two-Part Prompts

One possible approach to designating audience and purpose is to create a two-part prompt such as the one above. Part one briefly sets up the writing situation by guiding the student’s thinking and planning and by pointing out any special terms or conditions. Part two provides the directions for writing, including the purpose and any important rhetorical features. In addition, the directions always refer to readers and sometimes a particular reader. Directions

may also mention readers' expectations or needs. "This process ensures that the prompts are based on a communication model for which a specific audience has been identified" (California Department of Education 1990, I-3).

Teachers from the California Writing Project developed a range of two-part prompts for the California Assessment Program's statewide writing assessment and later adapted them for the Department of Defense Dependents Schools' systemwide writing assessment; both were conducted over a period of years beginning in the 1990s. Here is an illustrative prompt that invites students to write an evaluation:



Writing Situation:
Think about all the literature—stories, novels, poems, plays, essays—you have read this year in your English class. Choose the one you have enjoyed the most.

Directions for Writing:
Write an essay for your English teacher in which you evaluate your favorite literary work. Give reasons for your judgment. Tell your teacher why this work is valuable or not valuable. Your teacher will use your evaluation in selecting literature for next year's class.
(California Department of Education 1990, I-3)

What Teachers Say About Designating Audience and Purpose

"We have to remember that our kids write to audiences every day," South Carolina high school teacher Seddrick Bell reminds us. "Because of text messaging and Facebook, every time teenagers write something, they expect somebody to read it and to respond to it instantly. So to take the audience out of the prompt is to take the motivation out of the student."

For ELL students and special education students, "having a defined audience makes the writing more focused, more direct, and more elaborate," according to Dale Lee. "We also need to include the audience in the prompt because it helps students know how formal or informal to be. If they are writing to a friend, then 'Hey dude' could work."

"It's enormously helpful when writing a persuasive essay to know exactly who the writer is trying to persuade," says Paula Diedrich, a middle school teacher from Michigan. "On the other hand, when it comes to personal narrative, an audience as broad as 'interested readers' might do. In many respects, we write personal narrative for ourselves or for someone who

is comparable to us in some way.”

In the final analysis, the audience for a particular writing task should be a familiar individual or group. Under no circumstances should the audience be so specialized that certain students are disadvantaged, or so general that students are left adrift as they frame their responses.

Using a Partial Counterbalanced Design to Study the Performance of Groups

One thing we know for sure: given two prompts, students may excel at one and not so much at the other. As a result, the two uneven student attempts render impossible any kind of generalization about performance or growth because the prompts themselves are so dissimilar.

Let’s cast the problem another way. A teacher or teacher-researcher, an evaluator, or someone conducting some kind of study wants to find out how a group of students has grown from September to June, how first period differs from sixth period, or how second-graders compare across a school or district. In each instance, the need is for two prompts that elicit similar levels of performance so that one doesn’t grab the best performance at the expense of the other. But there is yet another consideration. To give both groups of students the same potential advantages and opportunities, the prompts need to be shuffled in a particular way. Specifically, half of each group receives the “A” prompt and the other half the “B” prompt in September. In June those students who wrote to the A prompt on the pre-assessment write to the B prompt on the post-assessment and vice versa.

To create prompts for use in a study with a partial counterbalanced design, the prompt writer must attempt to construct prompts that bring about the same kind of thinking and require the same kind writing skills—not a simple task by any means. Field-testing is a critical step in determining if the prompts do, in fact, lead to similar performance levels. As we know, however, prompts are notoriously unpredictable. So the partial counterbalanced design is the final step, the one that controls for possible differences in the thinking and writing that emerge from the prompts. For researchers who want to diminish prompt effects to an even greater extent, including additional prompts (beyond only two) further smoothes out potential prompt effects (see Figure 1).

The following prompts were administered in a partial counterbalanced design in a study to determine the effectiveness of NWP teaching strategies versus textbook strategies on two groups of Mississippi ninth-graders.



Prompt A:

The classroom is not the only place where there are rules. Write an essay to inform your teacher about a rule or a set of rules you have been asked to follow outside of the classroom. Be sure to tell the rule or set of rules and the ways that the rules have influenced you or have been important to you.

Prompt B:

School is not the only place we learn. Write an essay to inform your teacher about something you learned outside of school. Be sure to tell what you learned and the ways that what you learned has helped you or has been important to you. (Swain, Graves, and Morse 2006)

Alternative 1: Partial Counterbalance – Controls Prompt Effects

TIME	Program Group		Comparison Group	
	1/2 of group	1/2 of group	1/2 of group	1/2 of group
September	A	B	A	B
Late April	B	A	B	A

Alternative 2: Partial Counterbalance – With Increased Control of Prompt Effects
(One of a number of possible arrangements with four prompts)

TIME	Program Group				Comparison Group			
	1/4 of group	1/4 of group	1/4 of group	1/4 of group	1/4 of group	1/4 of group	1/4 of group	1/4 of group
September	A	C	B	D	A	C	B	D
Late April	B	D	A	C	B	D	A	C

Figure 1.

Things to Avoid

Hypothetical prompts

In many instances, prompts that ask writers to take on hypothetical situations—that is, to imagine or pretend (“If you could change places with someone else, who would it be?”)—can be troublesome. As Keech points out, students are forced into using the conditional verb forms, such as “I would”

or “I could” (1982, 152). Only the very best writers can maintain a consistent point of view throughout their papers, according to Keech. On the other hand, Mississippi primary teacher Robin Atwood argues that young children thrive on hypothetical situations: “The work of a young child is fantasizing. Playground talk is all about ‘Let’s play office, and I’m the boss’ or ‘Let’s play babies, and I’m the mamma.’ Fantasy allows youngsters to experience being in charge. What’s more, it’s typically their reading material. So they are right at home with hypothetical prompts.” Because the conditional problem does not seem to bother younger writers, Keech suggests tasks framed as “What should you do when...” for informal classroom activity—for example, posing advice column problems to upper elementary students (Keech 1982, 154).

Overcuing

In the early days of the Writing Project, Marjorie Kirrie wrote a lively piece for the Directors Newsletter, addressing her remarks to colleagues who were inexperienced in prompt design: “As a novice prompt writer you may have compensated for the demands of assessment by overwriting. You shore up topics with all kind of directions: ‘You are writing to...;’ ‘You have met a...;’ ‘Tell about...;’ ‘Tell how...;’ The series of directions tends to dictate the structure of the students’ responses, and essay after essay is little more than a stringing together of attempts to cope with each ‘Tell’ in the exact order given in the prompt. When prompts are overwritten, they not only deter students from making their own essay structures but also frustrate originality of thought and freshness of expression” (Kirrie 1979, 7).

Keech offers an example of overprompting:

Describe your school. Tell how it looks from the outside. Tell how your classroom looks. You may describe what happens in the hallways at different times of the day, or you may describe the lunchroom or playground. If you like, you may describe the people in your school. (Keech 1982, 176)

While this prompt suggests many ideas and choices, it has an unfortunate side effect of inviting writers to “describe superficially many different things rather than to concentrate on one aspect of a subject long enough to write effectively,” according to Keech (Ibid.).


Note that the first of the two prompts below resembles a short-answer quiz:

Write about your favorite place. Name the place and tell where it is. Tell how often you go there. Why is this place special to you?

How do you feel when you are there? What are some sights, sounds, colors, and smells in your favorite place? (Ibid., 146)

Keech suggests that this revision provides genuine options rather than implied directions:

Everyone has a special place where they like to go. Write about your favorite place to go. Describe the place so your reader can imagine what it is really like. Tell about what you do there and how you feel when you are there. Help your reader see why this place is special. (Ibid., 147)



Finally, problems may occur when ELL students encounter an elaborately cued prompt, according to California high school teacher Tracey Freyre: “When prompts ask for multiple tasks, English language learners focus on the first or easiest thing they are asked to do. Whenever possible, it’s important to minimize the number of tasks.”

“This kind of accommodation does not mean ‘dumbing down’ or sacrificing rigor,” says Rebeca Garcia-Gonzalez (2011), a 25-year veteran teacher of English learners. “It means making changes to concentrate on the skills we want to assess. A prompt that sticks to one or two key concepts or directions is more accessible to all students.”

Undercuing with the word *describe*

The word *describe* knows no bounds. By itself, it forces students into an existentialist abyss. “Describe your dog,” for example, encompasses head and tail and everything in between. “Without the addition of a limiting instruction, the students, in effect, must set their own limits and construct their own rhetorical purposes . . . students will define the task differently some very literally and others imaginatively” (Ruth and Murphy 1988, 275–276).

Edward White suggests that many teachers use the term *describe* when “they mean something as vague as ‘say something about the subject.’ For many students, this turns out to be an activity analogous to what in computer talk is called a ‘file dump’; an undifferentiated list of all information available, without organization, coherence, or context.”

White suggests other terms as alternatives: *list, enumerate, outline, design, summarize, review, interpret, define, prove, demonstrate* (White 2007, 29).

Another solution is to clarify “describe” with this simple addition:



Describe your favorite food (object, person) so that your reader will understand why it is your favorite. (Ruth and Murphy 1988, 276)

However, in the case of a physical description, the prompt needs to guide student writers to a point of view:



Describe your school the way it looks as you walk through it, taking any path you wish. (ibid.)

Finally, Texas teacher Cynthia Vetter cautions that verbs are not simply interchangeable. “The word *describe* may send a writer down one trail, while ‘tell about’ or ‘reflect on’ imply very different routes. Every word in a prompt needs to be carefully considered.”

Unnecessarily complex language

In order to display their best performances, English language learners benefit from a number of accommodations. Below is a list of features, identified by Jamal Abedi, that may have a negative effect on the extent to which ELLs understand a prompt (Murphy 2007). We have supplied examples for easy reference.

- **Complex sentences**

Most writers, even those who don’t normally write well, usually perform better when they are interested in the topic.

Alternate:

Always try to find a writing topic that is interesting to you.

- **Conditional and adverbial clauses**

If you want to show your best writing, be sure to write legibly and double-check your grammar before handing in your writing.

Alternate:

Write neatly and check for mistakes.

- **Long noun phrases**

Examining your writing for grammatical errors is an important step in the assessment process.

Alternate:

Check your writing for mistakes.

- **Relative clauses**

The audience to whom you are writing will appreciate details that you use to describe the scene.

Alternate:

Use details to tell about the scene.

- **Negations**

Failure to write specifically to the prompt is not a good idea.

Alternate:

Read the prompt. Write directly to the topic.

- **Passive voice**

Your writing will be collected by your counselor at the end of the class period and will be scored by a specially trained group of teachers.

Alternate:

Counselors will collect your paper. A group of teachers will score your writing.

- **Long phrases in questions**

Have you ever considered what it feels like to be trapped in a dark and spooky cave or to be stranded with strangers in a disabled elevator? Think of a time when you were unable to get away from an unpleasant situation. Write about such a time, making sure to recount the details of the situation, how you were feeling at the time, and how you feel when you reflect on it.

Alternate:

What does it feel like to be trapped in a broken elevator? Think of a time when you were in a scary spot. Write about that time. Be sure to use details. Tell how you felt at the time. Tell how you feel now when you remember it.

- **Unfamiliar vocabulary**

Think of a time when you witnessed recalcitrant behavior in a classmate. Write to describe the situation, the behavior of your classmate, and the reactions of others present. Finally, include your reflections on the incident.

Alternate:

Think of a time when you saw someone behaving badly. Tell what happened. Tell how you felt and what you learned.

Unnecessarily complex goals

Rebeca Garcia-Gonzalez describes a pivotal moment working with teachers to construct prompts: “In my experience, broad grade-level or content area goals sometimes get translated into complicated prompts that become a maze for students, particularly for English learners. As a Bay Area Writing Project teacher-consultant in 2007, I led a team of fifth-grade teachers at a local school in their efforts to develop a relevant, accessible assessment. At the outset, the team members decided together what they were most interested in finding out, and then stripped the task to the most critical assessment priorities. The result was mutually beneficial. Both students and teachers could perform with intention” (Garcia-Gonzalez 2011).

One-size-fits-all approaches

As the number of culturally and linguistically diverse students in our schools grows each year, the need for appropriate assessment practices becomes more crucial. Classroom teachers, in particular, have the opportunity to adapt their assessment tasks and practices to meet the needs and language proficiencies of a range of students, including English learners. Author and linguist Lorraine Valdez-Pierce suggests expanding traditional prompt formats with scaffolding techniques useful for all learners. “Teachers can modify the assessment task by simplifying the language and the format . . . providing word banks or other clues to responses, using visuals or graphics to present the task, and modeling the task for students” (Valdez-Pierce 2003, 49). In addition to using concrete items to give prompts more meaning, teachers might consider designing assessment tasks that include working with a partner or team, particularly for beginning English learners (Ibid., 9).

Using Wise Eyes to Create Effective Prompts

“*We need to keep in mind that the writing of topics is, after all, writing. All the problems and all the stages of writing are part of the process of devising topics, and no one should imagine it to be easy.*”

Edward M. White 2007

“Prompt writing is not impromptu,” says Marjorie Kirrie. Indeed, the task—with all its possibilities for inspiring or derailing meaningful student efforts—is hardly amenable to one-stop shopping. Nor can it shrug off process.

In this monograph, we have examined what goes into composing a prompt—the considerations, the caveats, and the occasional contradictions. Once composed, a prompt, like any serious piece of writing, merits a range of responses. NWP teachers specify what these responses might look like and, in particular, who the participants might be:

- “Be sure to pilot a prompt in some way with a small group of students, so you can find out if the prompt works the way you think it should work,” says Dale Lee.
- “Take a look at age, gender, geographic location, linguistic and cultural backgrounds, and socioeconomic factors,” advises Idaho’s Frank Dehoney. “Prompts can’t be developed in a closet. The closer you can get to the real world of the kids, the better those kids are going to perform on the writing.”
- “Teachers need to test out the prompts by sitting down and writing to them,” suggests Philadelphia’s Carol Merrill. “And, yes, policymakers need to do the very same thing.”
- “Think about giving the larger community of teachers a chance to see and respond to the prompts you develop,” says Rebeca Garcia-Gonzalez. “It would enrich all of us if teacher teams—when trying out innovative approaches to prompting and especially prompting for English learners—were to offer their ideas to others.”

In effect, these NWP teachers recommend that many eyes examine student writing prompts. And that brings us to the notion of “wise eyes.”

The premise behind wise eyes is relatively simple: professionals who work together, who bring different strengths and points of view to a project or task, tend to come away with a higher-quality, more clearly articulated, and more consistently understood outcome. The term, originally coined by Paul LeMahieu and Linda Friedrich, described the way professional communities can develop wise eyes for looking at student work (LeMahieu and Friedrich 2007, 14). It applies as well to the benefit of professional communities when developing prompts for meaningful student writing.

The bottom line in creating a prompt is to give students the best possible entry into a writing performance. Without a doubt, teachers, researchers, policymakers, and students themselves bring different and valuable perspectives to what constitutes “best.” In concert, their wise eyes can provide all the lenses needed to develop or spot the right prompt for the right students on the right occasions.

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The National Writing Project

The National Writing Project (NWP) is a nationwide network of educators working together to improve the teaching of writing in the nation's schools and in other settings. NWP provides high-quality professional development programs to teachers in a variety of disciplines and at all levels, from early childhood through university. Founded in 1974 at the University of California, Berkeley, NWP today is a network of more than 200 university-based sites located in all fifty states, the District of Columbia, Puerto Rico, and the U.S. Virgin Islands. Co-directed by faculty from the local university and K-12 schools, each NWP site develops a leadership cadre of teachers through an invitational summer institute and designs and delivers customized professional development programs for local schools, districts, and higher-education institutions. NWP sites serve more than 130,000 participants annually, reaching millions of students.

The National Scoring Conference

NWP's National Scoring Conference serves researchers across the network with independent scoring of student writing for various research projects. Between 2005 and 2011, nine national scoring events have produced student outcome data for eighteen local site studies and one national study, spanning grades 3-12, all using quasi-experimental or experimental designs (NWP Research and Evaluation Unit, 2010). Over the seven years, 404 teacher-consultants from 66 local NWP sites in 29 states were calibrated as scorers, including 59 experienced scorers who served as room and table leaders. Every scoring conference includes time for reflection among the teacher scorers. These reflections focus on both the scoring system itself as well as implications for the teachers' instructional practices. The reflective comments and conversations form the basis for continuous refinements to the scoring system, yet the primary purpose of the scoring conference is just that—obtaining valid and reliable scores to be used across multiple research studies.

The National Writing Project Research Archives

The National Writing Project Research Archives serve as a resource for the NWP network as well as other researchers who access NWP's website. Currently, NWP maintains archives with four areas of focus: writing prompts, rubrics for assessing writing, measures of classroom practice focused primarily on writing (including surveys, interviews, and observation tools), and empirical research conducted about NWP or within Writing Project settings. The archives are described on the NWP website at www.nwp.org/cs/public/print/doc/results/results_assessment.csp. Since 2007, NWP has engaged teacher-consultants in collecting and categorizing materials. To date, NWP has collected 1,074 prompts, 300 rubrics, 405 classroom measures, and 267 pieces of empirical research. NWP does not make claims about the overall quality of the archival materials, but it expects archive users to make professional judgments about quality and how to adapt materials to meet their purposes.