Write for Your Life: UCSB MEd 2013

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Abstract

Which sentence is more appealing?

“We went out to pizza tonight; their pepperoni is delicious.”

“OMG the za at woodstockz is off the charts!!!!!!!! Cheesy crusty spicy pepperoni. rockin ranch sauce, this pizza is AMAZEBALLSS!!!!!!!!!”

In one sentence, the reader is given no information except for the fact that the writer went out to pizza with someone and thought that the pepperoni was delicious. However, the sentence is extremely easy to read. In the other sentence, the reader knows that the writer went to Woodstocks for pizza, loved the cheese, crust, and ranch sauce, thought the pepperoni was spicy, and found Woodstocks to be an out of this world experience. However, the sentence is extremely difficult to read.

Which matters more in writing, voice or mechanics? This inquiry focuses on that question, seeking to find out which techniques are best for students and teachers to reach a desired goal of incredible writing. This discussion started out with a clear cut stance on the idea that voice is more important than mechanics in writing instruction, but through the aid of student work and personal student correspondence, the inquiry began to shift into other facets that can be considered to help aid students with writing activities.

The goals of this practice were to provide myself with a more in-depth knowledge of how to teach writing and to learn how to help students become the strongest writers possible.

Origin.

Graduating from UCSB in the spring of 2006 with a degree in Global Studies, I was ready to dive into the fast-paced jet set existence of magazine editing. However, all the resumes and cover letters that went out to *Time, Newsweek,* and *National Geographic* went unanswered. So I set to work putting up the family collectibles up for auction on eBay, which was good for about 2 weeks, and then I started realizing I needed to give more shape to my days and more cash money flowing through my back account. So, at a barbecue dinner one night, my aunt said the fateful words, "Dominic, why don't you substitute teach?" So, I culled all my transcripts and ran the CBEST gauntlet and inked my fingerprints, and before you could say, "Sit down and shut up!" I found myself in an eighth grade Language Arts classroom, writing out definitions of Shakespearean vocabulary, assigning homework, and using teacher speak like, "I'll wait." This led to six years of off and on substitute teaching, teach for six months and then travel for six months, not a bad gig for the recent college graduate who was looking for anything but a full time job.

Oakley, California is a sleepy town on the river roads out to Sacramento, where the country meets the suburbs, and as a child, I couldn't wait to globe hop. Hairball, my high school Yearbook advisor, was the only teacher I had who spoke extensively of washing dishes in Berlin and dodging cops in Egypt, mixing drinks in Manhattan and falling in love in Scotland. Our class was always held rapt by his tales, and I couldn't wait to make my own treks. Flash forward six years and I was diving the Great Barrier Reef and trudging around the Matterhorn; there was no end in sight. When I found myself in the classroom, my stories started tumbling out; whether it was a geography lesson or art class or reading literature, there always seemed to be a place for me to interject with a travel tale. I realize now that I was trying to give a more accessible approach to the material – I had always appreciated a human story when I was in school, wouldn't it be the same for the children I was "teaching?" This proved to be true as the kids always asked to hear about certain places and where I was going next. Being the youngest substitute teacher by about sixty years and constantly on the move, the kids would notice my months-long absences, and ask where I

had been and want to know details of my experiences over in Morocco and Denmark. And I was more than happy to share them.

Being an off and on substitute also enabled me to see the children through the years; my first year, I have distinct memories of a kindergarten class and sixth graders I taught multiple times. When I left the Oakley Union School District to go into UC Santa Barbara's teacher education program, those Kindergarteners were entering sixth grade, and the sixth graders were towering, automobile-driving juniors in high school. Talk about a trip! I was very fortunate for a substitute teacher, as I was able to cultivate personal relationships with these students due to the fact that I saw them semi-regularly over a lengthy period of time. I knew their brothers and sisters, moms and dads, friends, teachers; it was a very nice realization to see what happens when you teach in a small community over several years. And since I would leave the area and come back, and the kids wanted to know where I was and I wanted to know what they had been up to, I decided I wanted to find a way to keep in touch somehow. And so began the Great Postcard Hunt.

Being quite the thrift store junkie, I had stumbled across an amazing box of old postcards in Sweetwater, Tennessee, and decided that old fashioned pen to paper handwritten words would be the way in which I would stay in touch with my students. It definitely took some motivation, but I did start scribbling out some "What I am up to" updates and sending them out. There was no intention of writing to receive a response – some of these kids were in first grade at the time, so I really just wanted to say "Hey!" and show them how cool it is to receive mail.

When I started receiving responses, I was flabbergasted. Why on Earth would a child do a writing assignment that wasn't mandatory? And, why would they put actual effort into making their writing unique and interesting when, in my experience, kids seemed to loathe writing? And, lo and behold, some of the writing was actually…. good! Sure, some commas were misplaced here and there, and spelling seems to be a dying art, but man, these kids were writing with enthusiasm, and I could hear each of their voices in my head as I read their words.

Being amazed at reading school-aged kids' writing, I started wondering about the necessity of writing with voice, and thought that most English writing lessons are aimed at technical practices, not necessarily developing an individual's own unique style. And how could a teacher possibly do that, what with 180 students to turn into distinctive writers everyday? What is more important, technical skills or individuality in writing? Do they go hand in hand? Can you teach voice without the technical skills? Can you teach the technical without voice?

Dom Master Flash

Essential Question – What constitutes a successful writer?

Before I begin this inquiry, I want to make sure some definitions are clear. As I will be discussing student writing and the ways in which voice is prevalent in their writing (and later, mechanics), I want to give clarity to what these terms detail. The words "mechanics", "technical skills", and "basic skills" are used interchangeably, as are the terms "voice", "style", and "individuality."

Mechanics/Technical/Basic Skills: Grammar, punctuation, spelling, format, paragraphing, indenting, introduction, thesis, conclusion, hook, title, references, organization – all the mechanics behind the content that keep the writing sharp and coherent. Without all this technical tinkering, the most sharply thought-out and content-driven piece would sag under the weight of too many inconsistencies and mistakes. Who wants to read a mechanical mess?

Voice/Individual/Style: I believe that voice is a bit trickier to define than mechanics. In a nutshell, I believe voice is the essence of a writer's personality being showcased through the written word. It is the style and tone that help writers get their point across, and allow the reader to have a clearer idea of whose work they're reading. Voice dictates how the writing should be read – factual, fearful, glad, angry, upset, rallying, etc. Because I found defining voice to be similar to defining irony (DIFFICULT!), I found this definition on The Perfect Write, and thought it gave a good summation along with some excellent literary examples.

Voice Is Each Writer (see Appendix for complete article)

> I stated in my earlier article that voice is "you," and I firmly believe this. If someone is told he or she displays a striking voice, I'd like to think there is something genuinely scintillating about that writer's particular style. Likewise, if someone is claimed to possess a rich and vibrant voice, I'd expect to read a work with well-developed characters and expansive characterizations. But there is no way to be certain this will be the case, since the term "voice" is anything but definitive.

Voice Is Genuinely Often Quite Distinctive

Perhaps one of the ways to illustrate voice is to look at four of the most famous American writers of all time: Faulkner, Steinbeck, Hemingway, and Fitzgerald.

Faulkner is known for intricate sentence structure that he utilized to present extraordinary characterizations; Steinbeck wrote in an easier-to-read style, but with a comparable depth to his storylines; Hemingway on the other hand crafted brilliant characterizations via a terse, sharp style that required perfect word selection; while Fitzgerald infused his narratives with characterizations so rich with imagery that they created a mood for the entirety of his stories–which the reader could feel on each page. Each of these writers achieved a like result, but with unique, unmistakable voices predicated on the mastery of a particular writing technique.

A Voice Can Be Something Specific

My least favorite phrase is when someone says a writer has a strong voice. Why not just state that the author's prose is intelligently written? Or that the content will make the reader think? Or that the plot is complex with well-conceived threads that are explained in an exciting and realistic manner at the work's conclusion?

While It Can Indeed Be Difficult to Define, Voice Is Always Present

Voice is whatever any of us want to make it. It is a word that has few limits, since it can describe quintessential material just as well as something quite pedestrian. Yet owning a voice to be complimented is what all writers should strive for, regardless of how feeble the attempt might be to explain exactly what was recognized for its excellence. (Robert L. Bacon, www.theperfectwrite.com)

After reading these definitions, what I do know is that in six years of substitute teaching and a few months of student teaching, I have seen very few assignments that help students cultivate their own individual style. In my experience, classrooms are filled with Daily Oral Language, sentence corrections,

vocabulary sheets, and a myriad of fill in the blank activities. There have been only a handful of times where I have seen free write poetry assignments or creative writing papers being turned in for a significant percentage of a student's grade.

What I do not know is why instructing individual style in the classroom is so rare. Is it because it is too difficult to teach 38 different students to cultivate their own voice? Is it because writing exams are geared more towards mastery of technical skills? If it can be assumed that writing is more enjoyable when a writer has a developed style, why are we not stimulating that skill set in the students?

For this inquiry, I shall use a variety of nicknames to refer to persons of interest within this study.

And lastly, this inquiry is a concept in evolution. In my experience, I have found writing to be a tricky beast to have to learn how to tame. Debating writing principles is a tightrope walk, and this paper seeks to shed more light on how to turn students into Henry Millers and Milan Kunderas instead of Dan Browns.

Artifact Overview

The following artifacts are one piece of student work from my first month substitute teaching and several letters written to me by some of my past students. I chose these artifacts because I was fascinated by the fact that students had taken time to write something that was not a school assignment. Their writing intrigued me; it's funny, it's heartfelt, it's scatterbrained. However, I was able to distinguish a thread of voice running in and out of these letters, and wanted to take a deeper look at it to see if it is something I can apply to the classroom.

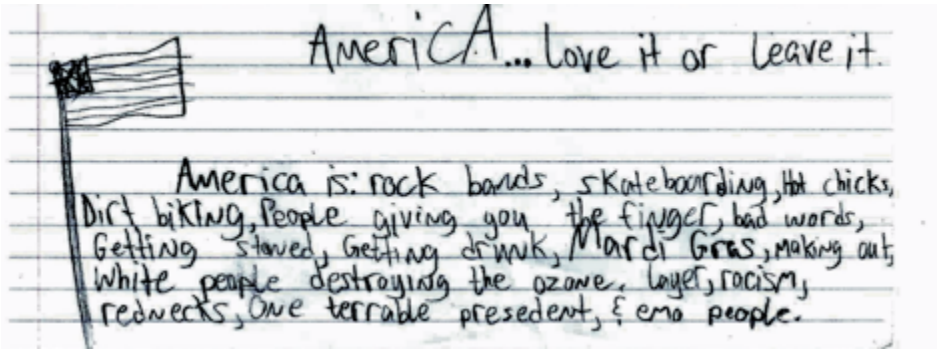
As for the school assignment, it was the very first piece of student work I ever kept for myself, I was pretty bowled over by its frankness, rebellious attitude, and the one-of-a-kind nature it represented compared to the rest of the class.

I also liked the juxtaposition of analyzing school assignments and personal correspondence. Whereas in the classroom students are writing for a grade, in personal correspondence students are writing to respond and cultivate a relationship with their pen pal.

I did not include any artifacts from my fall placement because I was more interested in analyzing these pieces of writing that I had been schlepping around in my accordion-pleated document case from one rented room to the next. “Why am I holding on to these?” I would always think to myself when I would unpack my things. And then on our first day in our Master’s class, it hit me. “THAT’S WHY.”

Artifact 1 – Rebel

The one that started it all. This was the first piece of student work that intrigued me, and made me realize that students have real opinions to share in their work and something to say, especially when you provide them with a prompt that gets them going. These are also opportunities for students to showcase their voice, especially if the assignment guidelines are not exceptionally strict and they can connect with the assignment. When I began substitute teaching in 2006, I subbed for a seventh grade English class and, finding myself with some extra time, assigned the kids a writing project to write one page about what America means to them. Rebel sat in the back row, carried around a skateboard, wore skinny jeans before they hit the big time, and was constantly shaking his shock of Justin Bieber bangs out of his eyes. I remember he had a toothy grin, and my mouth dropped to the floor when I saw this paper. Not only had he drawn some rather risqué artwork for a junior high student, he had bucked the traditional paragraph format and completely made the assignment his own.


AmeriCA... love it or leave it.

America is: rock bands, skateboarding, hot chicks, Dirt biking, People giving you the finger, bad words, Getting stoned, Getting drunk, Mardi Gras, making out, White people destroying the ozone layer, racism, rednecks, one terrable presedent, & emo people.

I took his paper home with me, partly because of the fact that I didn’t want him to get in trouble for writing things like “getting drunk,” “getting stoned,” “giving people the finger,” and drawing soldiers brandishing rocket launchers and swords, and partly because I thought that the paper was too original to get tossed in the wastebasket. Rebel was clearly engaged with the activity – too many words and phrases

stand out to make it seem like he was just goofing around. He actually took time to plan out his writing; things like "Mardi Gras," "white people destroying the ozone layer," "racism," and "one terrable presedent" (sic) are some pretty eyebrow-raising observations for a thirteen year old boy.

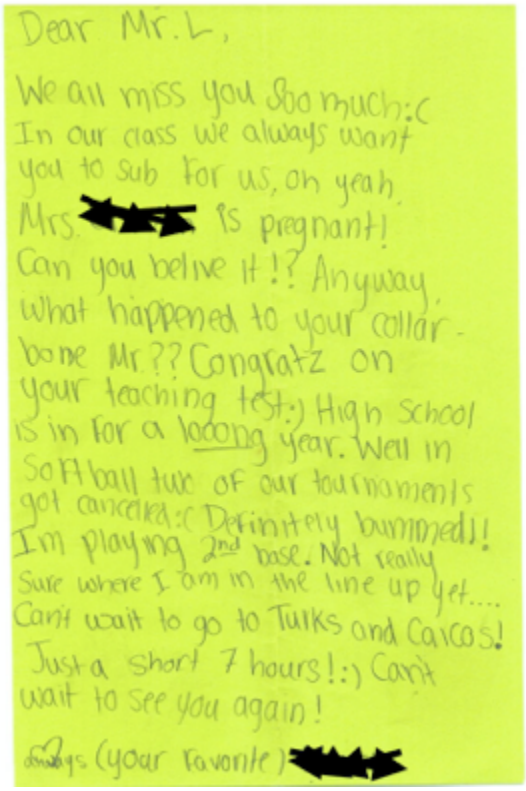
Again, this is a case of a distinctive writer's voice. Out of a class of 33 students, his work was the only one that stood out with original thought or style. How to cultivate that voice? He was given the same assignment as everyone else – why was he the only one to step outside the box (*way* outside) and deliver something that was exactly his perspective and point of view? What was it about this particular assignment that inspired him to write like this? Or, does he always write this way? One interesting piece with this was that Rebel's voice matched his classroom persona to a tee; his edgy clothes and modern look matched his eyebrow-raising rhetoric. Rebel used voice to enhance the character he was portraying to the junior high.

Artifact 2 – LaBo

After about three years of writing to students I met in Oakley, and then in Washington DC when I worked for a leadership conference, I was stunned to open my mailbox to find a letter from LaBo, a fifth grader from back home. I knew most of LaBo's, and was particularly close with her older sister and cousins. I was surprised at first to have received a letter from her, considering that I felt closer to her relatives, and reading her letter brought up the question of "Why did she write to me?" up for the first time, a question that would continue to surface whenever I would receive letters from students.

The envelope was hot pink with swirls and curlicues, was addressed to "Mr. L." and inside was a neon green paper adorned with stickers and drawings of flowers and butterflies. In addition to her artwork, LaBo had also written a solid two paragraphs inside the card. She told me about what was new on her softball team, how her teacher was doing, and talked about her upcoming vacation, all the hallmarks of a newsy letter. I did think she kicked it up a notch by referencing and asking questions about my own newsy update, gave me a light ribbing with "High school is in for a looong year," and correctly used sarcasm by saying that her trip would take "just a short 7 hours ;)" All this from a fifth grader! And

she correctly spelled 'Turks and Caicos', too! I was extremely impressed, and thought about what lead this child to write a lengthy, personalized letter that she was not required to do.



Dear Mr. L,

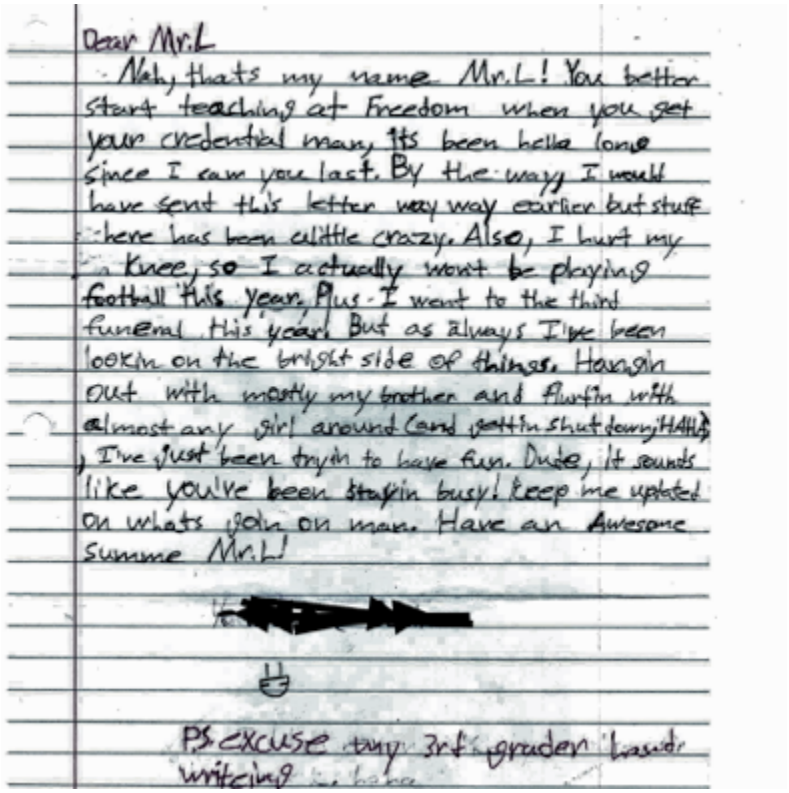
We all miss you Soo much :C In our class we always want you to sub for us, oh yeah Mrs. [redacted] is pregnant! Can you belive it!? Anyway, what happened to your collar-bone Mr?? Congratz on your teaching test :) High school is in for a looong year. Well in Softball two of our tournaments got cancelled :(Definitely bummed!! Im playing 2nd base. Not really sure where I am in the line up yet.... Can't wait to go to Turks and Caicos! Just a short 7 hours! :) Can't wait to see you again!

Always (your favorite) [redacted]

She had all the basic mechanics of writing down – punctuation, grammar, syntax, spelling – and used them well. However, she also spoke in her own voice, making jokes, referencing goofy times from when I subbed in her class. Basic writing mechanics are what teachers hammer in while at schools, but voice is something that I have seen get left on the classroom floor. How to teach 30 different children to write structurally the same, but thematically individualistic? LaBo's card got my brain turning, and made me start questioning what other piece of the puzzle was required to engage students enough to produce good writing.

Artifact 3 – Ochocinco

Tenth grader Ochocinco was the next student I received a message from, and it helped to solidify my burgeoning theory regarding writing practices. Ochocinco is a student I had known since fifth grader, athletically inclined but academically flippant, so I was shocked to see a page-long letter in my mailbox.



Dear Mr.L

Nah, thats my name Mr.L! You better start teaching at Freedom when you get your credential man, its been hella long since I saw you last. By the way I would have sent this letter way way earlier but stuff here has been a little crazy. Also, I hurt my knee, so I actually wont be playing football this year. Plus I went to the third funeral this year. But as always I've been lookin on the bright side of things. Hangin out with mostly my brother and flurtin with almost any girl around (and gettin shut down, HAHA) I've just been tryin to have fun. Dude, it sounds like you've been stayin busy! Keep me updated on whats goin on man. Have an Awesome Summe Mr.L!

[redacted]

PS excuse my 3rd grader hand writeing (sic).

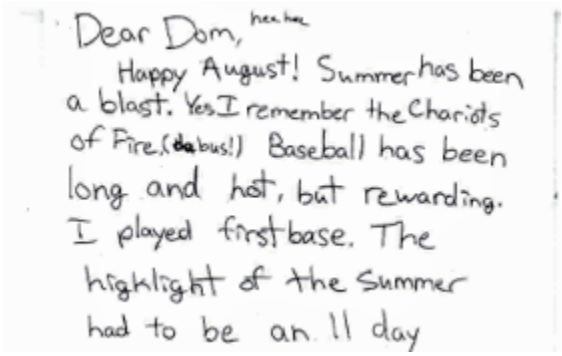
I laughed as he wrote about "flurting (sic) with almost any girl around (and getting shot down, HAHA)" and "But as always, I've been looking on the bright side of things," and ending with "excuse my 3rd grader hand writeing (sic)." His words were surprising considering he had never been a stellar student or shown any interest in writing – I can remember him groaning over assigned writing activities and not turning in homework. This piece of writing showed enthusiasm and a fun attitude toward writing a letter. Despite the fact that some of his mechanics were incorrect, he had a distinct writer's voice throughout the letter, something I would not have expected of Ochocinco.

This artifact showed me that it is possible to reach lackadaisical students and get them writing. I had previously thought that the lazy students were complete write-offs, and that you really weren't going to be able to coax them into writing activities no matter what. However, Ochocinco was able to write a decent two paragraphs and make them his own. I would have predicted that he would write very sparsely, with no personal comments or quotations whatsoever. However, this artifact strengthened my resolve to bring more voice and style lessons into the classroom. Writing that has been forced out of a student can sound heavy and unnatural – Ochocinco's writing did not. I enjoyed the lightness and humor he brought

to his writing. If a typically unfocused student can be inspired to write with voice, then I can believe that it can happen for others as well.

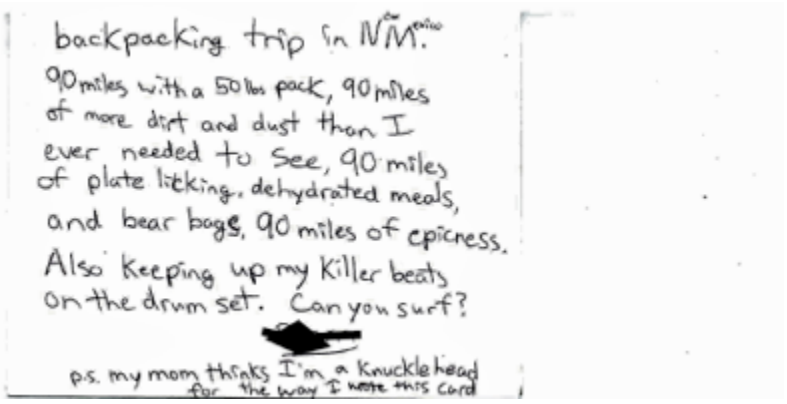
Artifact 4 – Baby Bjorn

In contrast to Ochocinco, Baby Bjorn is a stellar student. I met him at a leadership conference in Washington DC where teachers nominated their best and brightest to attend the seminar to learn about government and history. I did not know him well, but an email from him a few months later inspired me to write to him. I received a card in the mail a few months later.



Dear Dom,

Happy August! Summer has been a blast. Yes I remember the Chariots of Fire (fabulous!) Baseball has been long and hot, but rewarding. I played first base. The highlight of the summer had to be an 11 day



backpacking trip in NM. 90 miles with a 50 lbs pack, 90 miles of more dirt and dust than I ever needed to see, 90 miles of plate licking, dehydrated meals, and bear bags, 90 miles of epicness. Also keeping up my killer beats on the drum set. Can you surf?

p.s. my mom thinks I'm a knucklehead for the way I wrote this card

In his opening greeting, he answered some of my questions regarding school and sports, and spoke of a few memories from the conference. He then proceeded to share his summer adventure, with "The highlight of the summer had to be an 11 day backpacking trip in New Mexico. 90 miles with a 50 lbs pack, 90 miles of more dirt and dust than I ever needed to see, 90 miles of plate licking, dehydrated meals, and bear bags, 90 miles of epicness." This writing blew me away; the repetition, the detail, the "twist" ending, it all added up to an amazing description, something that my own friends cannot do within their writing.

I was also impressed by the maturity of his structure. He opened with a greeting, immediately referenced the bus from the DC trip, then launched into an update on his life. At the end he closed with a question directly to me. This is a format I would expect in a letter from a friend or relative. Other students hit the same notes in their letters, but the flow of their writing wasn't as smooth as Baby Bjorn's. This also showed a personal trend in his mechanics, a topic which will be discussed at length later on in Chapter Three.

Baby Bjorn clearly has a very distinct writer's voice, which adds immeasurably to the strength, wit, and memorability of his letter. How was he taught? Did he cultivate this technique himself? Does he write like this for all of his writing assignments? I found this to be a prime example of writing from the heart, as opposed to a standard response to a letter some old teacher mailed him a while ago.

Artifact 5 – T-Bone Family (Raggy, Schwaite, & Tiger)

Ah, the T-Bone family. I first met Schwaite in third grade during my second year of subbing. A smartass with reading issues, Schwaite had more personality than the rest of the class combined, and could go toe-to-toe with me with jokes even as a nine year old. A year later, I met his older sister, Raggy, as a seventh grader, and she had the same loopy, edgy sense of humor that Schwaite has.


playing football and we are undefeated. Im in mrs [redacted] class

Sounds like you are doing great!


Mr L,
Your a brat for what you just said! But I will say Hi! Hope your having a Blast I miss you, you need to come down here and say Hi!

P.S your gonna be an english eacher..... I feel sorry for your students!

Agreed... You Don't Have To lie about you hanging out with "good looking Spanish" teacher. Have a great time!!

With one day to connect with the kids, as a sub, I always appreciated the students that met me halfway in talking with me. These kids did more than that. Lastly, I met the youngest member of the family, Tiger, when he was in the pre-kindergarten class. A lovable bully, he was the smartest kid in the class and joked around with me from day one because of stories he had been told by his siblings. These are some of my favorite children to see when I go back home, and I was very touched to see their letter in my mailbox.

This one plays out a bit differently, their mother, obviously spearheaded sending me a letter (her note is right next to Tiger's.) However, the two older students definitely responded to me in their own words. Tiger's note to me is definitely an update on what he is doing, something that I could imagine his mother telling him to write. When I had written them their last postcard, I had teased Raggy about a boy she liked, which she references with "Your (sic) a brat for what you just said!" and hits right back at me with, "Your (sic) gonna be an English teacher……. I feel sorry for your students!" Adding to the inside jokes, Raggy's last sentence is underlined by Schwaite, where he noted, "Agreed." I had written him that I

was too busy to come see his football games because I was hanging out with good-looking Spanish teachers, which is what he is responding to with a characteristic "diss."

I am giving these kids questions and prompts, but they are coming up with clever responses on their own. The students I have worked with have enjoyed my joking demeanor and gentle teasing, but very few are willing to do a quid pro quo-style banter. Is the writer's voice related to their own personality? Or is it just being able to respond to the right question with the right answer at the right time?

Rationale

Several of these artifacts are personal letters, so I was hanging on to them for sentimental reasons to begin with. With Rebel's "Rage against the machine" piece, I kept that because it was such a unique and eye-catching piece of student work; in six years being in the classroom, I still have yet to find writing like that. I didn't collect other work, like Rebel's classmates' assignments, because they were standard "My country tis of thee" proclamations of patriotism, things that I have heard and read a hundred times over. I am interested in analyzing unique, distinctive writing, and how it comes to be.

When I started my fall placement at the junior high, I had been keeping an eye open for anything that might aid my analysis. However, I found the pieces of writing that I had been saving so much more interesting than copy-changed poems and *Flowers for Algernon* comprehension questions. The postcards had showed me the benefit of student's having complete creative control over their writing, and I found that more interesting to analyze. While Rebel's classwork did have some parameters, he made the assignment his own with its atypical structure and adjoining comics. What were these kids thinking? What brought out their voice?

Several factors contributed to crafting the writer's voice. In the instance of the classroom assignment, Rebel's ingenuity helped him interpret the assignment in his own words and provide an opinionated, stylized response to the prompt. With the postcards, students utilized inside jokes, prior knowledge and experiences, humor, and changes in tone to write their responses, which all helped to cultivate their own particular voices within their writing.

Rounds of Analysis

I've reread these works countless times. I mentally had them ranked in my head as to which one was my favorite, but each one is a favorite because I know each of the writers (except for Rebel) personally. When I problem-spaced with a UCSB professor, I ranked them by how prevalent their voice was in the letters. Since voice seemed to be the topic nosing out the other horses in my thesis topic race, I decided that that would have to be my rubric by which I ranked the writing.

However, to keep the continuity going, I decided to place these artifacts in the order by which I received them. Once that order was set, I analyzed again and found that that placement was actually fairly representative of the levels of voice and personal tone taken in the writings. Since Rebel's writing was the outlier (it being the lone school assignment), and the most structurally different from other class essays, I placed it first to show what students are capable of in the classroom. After that, in order, LaBo, Ochocinco, Baby Bjorn, and then the T-Bone family's letters showed increasing levels of voice and liberties taken in writing. While LaBo and Ochocinco included general platitudes and some personal touches to their letters, Baby Bjorn's included a more mature format, and a more mature writer's voice detailing his summer with details, and ending on a specific question. Lastly, the letter from the T-Bone family was full of personal touches and specific references.

From this ordering, I was able to include personality, inside knowledge, and freedom of structure to crafting a successful writer's voice. At this point, technical skills were mentioned, but not used in analysis rounds. I was primarily focused on analyzing writer's voice, and wanted to keep the focus on voice and style instead of mechanics, as I was planning to cover mechanics in Chapter Two.

New Thoughts

Once some type of organization occurred, I was able to solidify my theories into a figure eight – with an extra loop. Technical skills, basic foundations, and writing conventions became the **Impersonal** tag, which was linked to connection, motivation, and the type of project at hand (**Interpersonal**), which

was then linked to the writer's voice, the reason for this hulking leviathan of a paper, the **Individual/Personal** tag.



My foggy brain started to clear once I was able to sort through these theories, and create categories into which my findings would fall. While I knew I wanted to focus on voice in writing, I kept coming back to the fact that I do find writing conventions to be extremely important, too. Therefore, voice, which I found to be the most important of the three entities, became the most emphasized loop. Type of assignment, while not strongly debated, was not completely forgotten, and its importance was judged to be of a medium level and left to be analyzed later. Despite the importance of individuality in writing, I decided that I couldn't ignore technical skills, and problem-spacing helped lock that into place. Thus, the creation of the 'Impersonal' tag helped to give it a name and place in this study, which would then be explored more in depth in Chapter Two.

Conección

I spent a lot of time before applying to this program trying to write, or find inspiration to write. Technical skills came naturally to me when I was learning the writing process, so I always strove to develop my own style to write with a memorable tone. This sparked my interest in how voice forms and how it can be taught in a classroom setting, where differentiated teaching is the goal but is not necessarily always in place.

With all of these students, with the exception of Rebel, I had gotten to know them over the course of several classroom experiences. These were students with whom I had bonded and established a

kinship. While I do remember having a fun and lighthearted connection with Rebel that day in class, I don't remember teaching him again, whereas someone like Schwaite I taught off and on for four years.

Looking at these artifacts, I concluded that voice can definitely be found in student writing, but that it was as rare as a Snow Leopard. Out of 33 students in Rebel's Language Arts class, his was the lone assignment that showed individual style. During my fall placement at the junior high, I found no examples of individual style within the assignments given. Since I was searching for voice to analyze, I chose to reference only the postcards that I had received and the one example of student work that was not a dime a dozen. Since I sifted through hundreds of papers that fall, I assumed that voice-cultivating assignments were a rare breed, and that I needed to analyze some mechanics-driven assignments in order to make a more well-rounded analysis, which set me up perfectly for Chapter Two.

Questions to lead me into the next realm

I wanted to take some time to list out some of the questions that were boiling in my brain, effectively closing out Chapter One and setting me up for Chapter Two.

- *Is a writer's voice an innate ability, or is it developed over time?*
- *How are students taught to write?*
- *It would seem that more teaching time is spent on technical skills, is there a belief that those are the only skills that are important post-high school?*
- *How does the type of assignment affect voice or mechanics?*
- *Questions – everyone loves to respond to a good question; how to make sure your writing question hits everyone?*

Chapter 2 Blues

Essential question- What is most beneficial for students, learning mechanics or learning voice?

It was a bit of a slow burn getting Chapter 2 off the ground. The previous chapter's essential question of what constitutes a successful writer morphed into the question above, as I wanted to be more specific and distinguish which entity was more important, voice or mechanics.

After Chapter 1 splattered out of my left cortex's birth canal, I didn't think about it for six weeks. The break served me well, though I didn't know that at first. Walking into master's class at the beginning of the semester, I was not preparing to write, or edit, or discuss, or problem space, so when we were told to pair up and brain bounce, I started scribing for my classmate, Lech Walesa, and hoped that my time would run out when sweet, sweet break rolled around. I enjoyed spacing out with Lech Walesa, it reminded me of successfully getting on track on Chapter 1, and Lech Walesa brought up assigning presidential reports to his students, which brought student writing flooding back to me.

By the time I was on deck, I muttered a few gripes about not having anything to say, and then jabbered away for the next 45 minutes with Walesa scrawling on an impressive mound of scraps. What was I looking for? I had spent twenty pages detailing examples of voice found in writing that was done outside of school. A few of the students had been able to weave personality into their words, but basic skills were not the focus. I wanted to see if I could find artifacts that would show what was being done in schools to promote voice and skills in writing. And lo and behold, three days later, I stumbled on some paragraph skeletons that were being used as a scaffold in a ninth/tenth grade English 3D class.

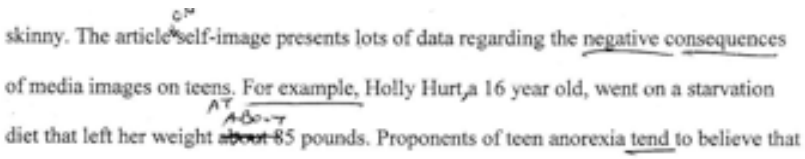
English 3D is an Academic Language-obsessed support class designed for English Language Learners, students who have leapt out of Read 180, but whose test scores and grades need to hit certain marks before being labeled as Fluent.

Or, at least that's what the district says.

But that's another Master's thesis.

Students were writing articles about teen anorexia, and the learning objective of the assignment was for students to be able to use phrases and terms like “Furthermore…”, “I am in favor of…”, “I oppose…” etc. The writing assignment was prompted from an article recounting several young girls’ bouts with eating disorders, so the students had a very limited and very set list of terms and vocabulary to work with. Personal opinion was a necessity in order to complete the paragraphs, but since all the transitions were in place and leading them along, I didn’t feel that the assignment did much to develop a singular writing style.

However, this being a heavily-scaffolded activity grappling with vocabulary, transitional phrases, and argument organization, this assignment was a perfect example of teaching students elementary writing mechanics. After I read over their papers, many students were still forgetting articles and connectors, as seen in the work below (clip from Artifact 6, reviewed later in Chapter Two.)


skinny. The article's self-image presents lots of data regarding the negative consequences of media images on teens. For example, Holly Hurt, a 16 year old, went on a starvation diet that left her weight ~~about~~ 85 pounds. Proponents of teen anorexia tend to believe that

How can students be expected to write descriptively and personally if they can’t put the correct words in the right order? I found myself back at the whole “You have to learn to walk before you can dance” argument, and started rethinking my theories. Can students learn to become successful through a thirteen-year barrage of grammar drills and sentence frames? I don’t think so. On the other hand, are students going to be able to write individually and memorably if they don’t even know of all the tools at their disposal? I don’t think so.

So where does that leave me? With a fuller realization of the importance of technical skills.

When my MEd group met up with our facilitator, I laid out my problem spacing in the haphazard manic fashion which has become my method working in TEP. As the scatterplot of paper scraps sat peacefully in front of us, our facilitator patiently asked me questions until we started boiling down my material and ideas until we had one seemingly clear-cut question, which ended up being ‘What makes a

successful writer?" With this question beginning to loom over all the others swirling around my brain, I ended up in familiar territory.

Can a student who is taught only writing with voice and to cultivate their individual skills become a successful writer?

No. While this writer may write with gusto and have fascinating stories and creative discourse, no one is going to want to read papers rife with grammatical and structural errors. The paper could be pure genius stream-of-consciousness styled script, but writing errors are exceptionally distracting, to the point where the reader will typically stop reading and move on. Successful writers must find some way to connect their personality and experiences with the subject material, which will in turn help connect the reader.

Can a student who is taught only basic grammar, spelling, punctuation, and structural skills become a successful writer?

No. While technically perfect essays can be impressive, and can sometimes help provide instructional examples to others, reading them can be a torturous and tedious process. If the writer has nothing to say, then the reader is essentially left with nothing to read. If the writer has something to say but executes it in a monotonous tone, the reader becomes bored, and will cast it aside just as quickly as one would if they were reading expressive writing riddled with errors. I thought Gary Provost's comment from Roy Peter Clark's *Writing Tools* helped explain the problem with monotonous writing. (Read it out loud.)

> This sentence has five words. Here are five more words. Five-word sentences are fine. But several together become monotonous. Listen to what is happening. The writing is getting boring. The sound of it drones. It's like a stuck record. The ear demands some variety. Now listen. I vary the sentence length, and I create music. Music. The writing sings. It has a pleasant rhythm, a lilt, a harmony. I use short sentences. And I use sentences of medium length. And sometimes, when I am certain the reader is rested, I will engage him with a sentence of considerable length, a sentence that

> burns with energy and builds with all the impetus of a crescendo, the roll of the drums, the crash of the cymbals–sounds that say listen to this, it is important. (Clark, 2008.)

This quote brought up the importance of syntax, showing how word order and sentence length are incredibly important when writing. While voice is prevalent in this piece through vocabulary and imagery, the content and purpose is on technical skills, showing the importance of mechanics in a person's writing arsenal. While my thoughts on the importance of voice are unchanged, my previous banishment of technical skills to the back seat is changing.

I am aware of the fact that technical writing has been on the rise in the job market within the past decade, and that stream of consciousness writing "Don't think, just write!" helped create the likes of Virginia Woolf and William Faulkner. However, teachers are expected to turn out well-rounded writers, writers that can conquer any task with the written word that is given to them. In order to excel at technical writing, one must be in command of their own voice that is running strongly throughout those perfectly crafted sentences. In order to excel at stream of consciousness and personalized writing, one must know all the rules in order to break them, if necessary. The fresh and shiny Common Core Standards require eleventh and twelfth grade students to be proficient in the following writing arenas:

CCSS.ELA-Literacy.W.11-12.1 Write arguments to support claims in an analysis of substantive topics or texts, using valid reasoning and relevant and sufficient evidence.

CCSS.ELA-Literacy.W.11-12.2 Write informative/explanatory texts to examine and convey complex ideas, concepts, and information clearly and accurately through the effective selection, organization, and analysis of content.

CCSS.ELA-Literacy.W.11-12.3 Write narratives to develop real or imagined experiences or events using effective technique, well-chosen details, and well-structured event sequences.

In order to successfully complete these standards and jump the California High School Exit Exam (CAHSEE) hurdle, students must demonstrate knowledge and precision while in the middle of prompts

like “Which educator has inspired you the most during your academic career?” or “Write an essay discussing the relative strengths and weaknesses of one particular source for news.”

Before we continue, I would like to define “proficient”, “successful”, and “beneficial,” three words which constantly swirl in and out of this paper.

Beneficial- conferring benefits**:** conducive to personal, educational, or social well-being.

Proficient- well advanced in an art, occupation, or branch of knowledge.

Successful- gaining or having gained success. (Merriam Webster, 2013.)

In my opinion, the terms can be defined in the classroom in the following ways:

Beneficial- aiding the student’s confidence and abilities, in writing and other areas of study.

Proficient- the student is meeting grade-level benchmarks.

Successful- the student is earning solid, passing grades (B or better) on related assignments, and can take apply these skills to tasks outside of the classroom.

For the purposes of this inquiry, ‘Beneficial’ is referenced to be the characteristic detailed the most, as the student’s overall academic well-being is seen to be more important than good grades or passed benchmarks.

What is most Beneficial?

Certain kinds of writing require different contexts – depends on audience, intended, purpose, varying circumstances, which have been laid out in the following frame. Due to this inquiry’s emphasis on what skills are most beneficial to a student, and that ‘proficient’ and ‘successful’ will appear from time to time, this section will define ‘beneficial’ from different perspectives. The following figures detail references from numerous writing and education articles, and I categorized the writing techniques discussed in said articles into either technical skills or voice requirements or activities.

Test Time

In order for students to pass these tests and benchmarks, which learning is more beneficial, skills-based or style-based writing techniques? In this instance, I believe that a student who scores high

on the technical portions would outscore a student who had more of a unique tone and singular style. Skills-based learning would be more beneficial. Figure 1 below shows the vast difference in amount of requirements demanded for technical skills and for voice.

(Information taken from California Department of Standards 7th Grade Writing Benchmark)

Technical Skills Requirements	Voice Requirements
● Formatting ● Structure ● Purpose ● Thesis ● Complex/Compound sentences ● Verb tense ● Independent	● Descriptive details ● Central idea

With this look at writing requirements deemed important by the state, technical skills handily trump voice. Within this set of standards, I chose to categorize Descriptive details and Central idea as Voice because I found those to be the requirements most closely related to voice. Although an argument can be made that these are also Technical Skills, for the purposes of this inquiry, they will be linked to Voice. For further research, I would want to see how many of those passing scores also had a unique and distinct style.

The Wonderful World of Writing

In order for students to enjoy writing and view it as an effective way of communication, which learning is more beneficial, skills-based or style-based writing techniques? In this instance, I would say that a student would become more inspired to write if they learned different styles and tones and played around with their own words and phrasing. Style-based learning would be more beneficial.

(Information taken from the U.S. Department of Education's article "How to Help Your Child Learn to Write Well & Love It")

Technical Skill Activities

- Revise
- Note-taking
- Make lists
- Brainstorm

Voice Activities

- Keep a journal
- Use games like crossword puzzles
- Utilize EVERYTHING: lyrics, poems, thank you notes, letters, etc.
- Enthusiasm

With this look at writing requirements deemed important by the U.S. Department of Education, voice-directed activities handily trump mechanics. While revising, note-taking, and list-making can all lead to developing certain characteristics of voice, for the purposes of this inquiry, the methodical nature and formatting of notes and lists help place them within Technical Skills. Also, as revision is used to improve and correct mistakes, this inquiry views it as a solid Technical Skill. For further research, I would want to see how many of those journals and diaries had correct mechanics.

Writing as Life Preserver?

In order for students to utilize writing effectively in the future, as a life skill, whether it be writing a cover letter, an ad for a roommate, or even a love letter, which learning is more beneficial, skills-based or style-based writing techniques? In this instance, I would say that both skills are equally important. Interviewers will immediately cast aside any writing that has errors in it, but they will also not hire you if you have nothing to say. When hunting down apartments and houses on craigslist, I would not reply to places with spelling/grammar mistakes and didn't have some unique element describing the house, themself, or the neighborhood, I interpreted those qualities as a lack of commitment or interest in actually completing the deal. If the person couldn't bother to spell check the ad or tell me who lives nearby, why would they bother to pay rent on time, be courteous, get to know me, etc. Your writing says a lot about who you are. Skills-based and style-based writing would be equally beneficial.

(Information taken from Bren Communication Center Tips on writing an effective cover letter)

Technical Skill Requirements

- Sterling writing conventions
- Professional tone
- Proofread
- Make your claim
- Format (introduction, middle, conclusion)

Voice Requirements

- You have something to say
- Memorable
- Introduce yourself
- Showcase your knowledge and skill set
- Enthusiasm

With this look at writing requirements deemed important by the Bren Communication Center, technical skills and voice carry equal weight. For further research, I would want to see how many of those cover letters analyzed that possessed both requirements went on to land that writer a job.

Makin' the Grade

In order for students to earn a good grade in their classes and from their teachers, it will depend on what the assignment is asking. I believe that students would benefit most from having both skill sets in their arsenal, so that they can be competent in an array of writing tasks. When I was in high school around 2000, most instruction and essay corrections came in the form of grading on mechanics, nowadays, there is a large movement among teachers to grade students' writing based on content and let the mechanics take a backseat to the subject. Because of this, both skills-based and style-based writing would be beneficial.

(Information taken from Benchmark 4 Rubric used by my Master Teacher)

Technical Skill Requirements

- Clear thesis
- Concrete evidence
- Quote usage
- Hook
- Structure/
- Organization

Voice Requirements

- "Why should I believe YOU?" (use of Ethos)
- Strong vocabulary
- Memorable
- Personality
- Definitive style

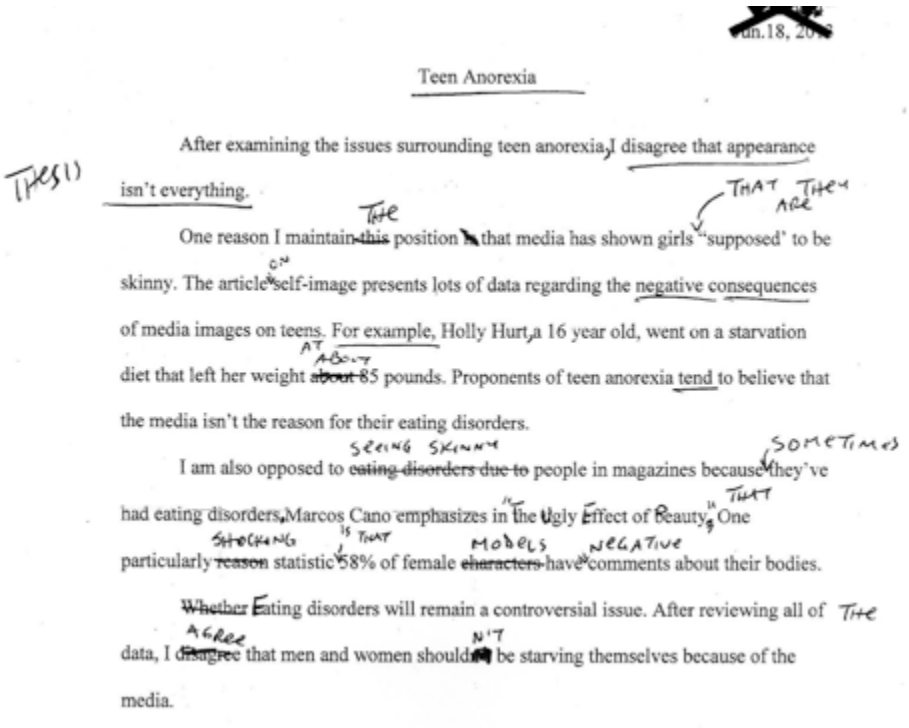
With this look at writing requirements deemed important in my Master Teacher's classroom, technical skills and voice carry equal weight. For further research, I would want to see how many students were successfully using each and every requirement. (This was my Master Teacher's rubric used for his other classes, not the classes I was teaching, which is why I do not have any hard data analyzed.)

What do all these figures mean? Large bubbles represent the skill that is more favored by that particular perspective, small bubbles represent the skill that is less favored. Same-sized bubbles represent perspectives that equally favor both skill sets. I categorized requirements into technical skills or voice by whether the requirement was a stylistic or a mechanical technique. These decisions were made by myself after having spent Chapter One and Chapter Two analyzing artifacts for style and mechanics.

Putting it into play

In English 3D, the students have assignments that come from Kate Kinsella's textbook and workbook script. The books consist of ten different issues that the students are supposed to discuss and write about throughout the year, and are chock full of sentence frames and paragraph skeletons. Each student was given articles on teen anorexia and its link to the media, and told to write an essay stating either "Yes, the media helps lead teens to anorexia" or "No, the media does not lead teens to anorexia." They were given a fill-in-the-blank set of paragraph skeletons and told to fill it out, then type up a final draft. The following artifacts are two examples of the assignment, followed by a breakdown and analysis of their technical skills. The scoring breakdown is there to show how the students fared using each required phrase. The focus on phrases was done because since technical skill mistakes can be of such a wide variety, I wanted to focus on one specific technical skill and chose the one that was highlighted to be the goal of the assignment. I chose to analyze this assignment because of its emphasis on mechanics, wanting compare with the previous chapter's emphasis on voice. I hoped analyzing these artifacts would help further my growing theory that technical skills are just as important as voice.

Artifact 6 – Banana



Jan.18, 20[redacted]

Teen Anorexia

After examining the issues surrounding teen anorexia, I disagree that appearance isn't everything.

One reason I maintain ~~this~~ position is that media has shown girls "supposed' to be skinny. The article on self-image presents lots of data regarding the negative consequences of media images on teens. For example, Holly Hurt, a 16 year old, went on a starvation diet that left her weight ~~about~~ 85 pounds. Proponents of teen anorexia tend to believe that the media isn't the reason for their eating disorders.

I am also opposed to ~~eating disorders due to~~ people in magazines because they've had eating disorders. Marcos Cano emphasizes in the Ugly Effect of Beauty, One particularly ~~reason~~ statistic 58% of female ~~characters~~ have comments about their bodies.

~~Whether~~ Eating disorders will remain a controversial issue. After reviewing all of data, I ~~disagree~~ that men and women should be starving themselves because of the media.

Table 1: Banana's Scoring Breakdown for Phrase

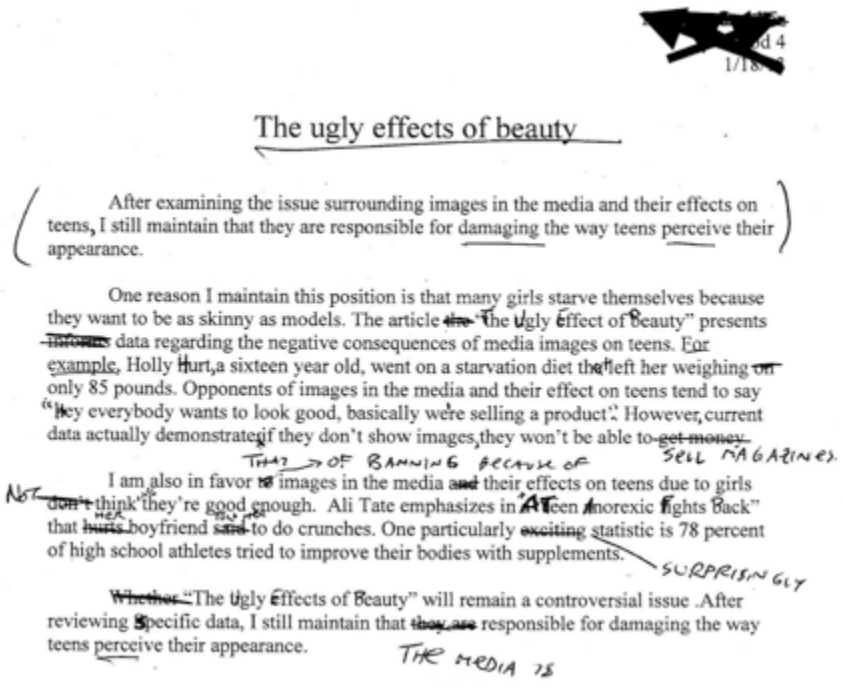
Phrase	Correct/Incorrect Usage
After examining the issues	Correct
I agree/disagree	Incorrect
One reason I maintain the position	Incorrect
The article on	Incorrect
For example	Correct
Proponents/opponents	Incorrect
I am also opposed to/in favor of	Correct
[author] emphasizes	Incorrect
One particularly ___ statistic	Incorrect
Whether __ will remain controversial	Incorrect
After reviewing the data	Correct

Banana used four of the eleven given phrases correctly, less than half the terms given. Five was the class average.

Banana filled in all the blanks and was able to extract data from the articles, and yet the sentence frames inhibited her from creating proper syntax. Underneath each of the blanks in the essay texts, students were prompted with italicized words in parentheses, such as (your argument), (topic sentence), (evidence from article), and so on. There was no room for Banana to show off her style and writer's voice in this format. I believe some of that is okay- as Banana is an English Language Learner, she needed to learn what a topic sentence is, what evidence consisted of, how to use the term "For example." These are all things she needs to know, but does the learning have to be so rote? Judging by the corrections to her writing, the format caused her to make many mistakes that she might not have made had she not been forced to follow such strict guidelines. Since the paragraph skeleton had many transition words in place, Banana did not think she might need to change her own words to match those transitions. In the spot where she writes "The article self-image…" she had put a transition in between "article" and "self-image." Since Banana was following the format of the skeleton, she did not think she needed to modify any of the words or sentences she was filling the blanks in order to make the sentence more coherent.

Banana's failing score using academic language phrases (36%) shows that her technical skills being measured are lacking. Transitional phrases and word comprehension caused her multiple problems. Bottom line? Her paper is almost incomprehensible because of the amount of errors.

Artifact 7 – Brandito



The ugly effects of beauty

After examining the issue surrounding images in the media and their effects on teens, I still maintain that they are responsible for damaging the way teens perceive their appearance.

One reason I maintain this position is that many girls starve themselves because they want to be as skinny as models. The article ~~the~~ "The Ugly Effect of Beauty" presents ~~Throws~~ data regarding the negative consequences of media images on teens. For example, Holly Hurt, a sixteen year old, went on a starvation diet that left her weighing ~~at~~ only 85 pounds. Opponents of images in the media and their effect on teens tend to say "Hey everybody wants to look good, basically we're selling a product". However, current data actually demonstrate if they don't show images, they won't be able to ~~get money~~ SELL MAGAZINES. THAT → OF BANNING BECAUSE OF

I am also in favor ~~of~~ images in the media ~~and~~ their effects on teens due to girls NOT ~~don't~~ think they're good enough. Ali Tate emphasizes in "A Teen Anorexic Fights Back" that ~~hurts~~ her boyfriend ~~said~~ to do crunches. One particularly ~~exciting~~ statistic is 78 percent of high school athletes tried to improve their bodies with supplements. SURPRISINGLY

~~Whether~~ "The Ugly Effects of Beauty" will remain a controversial issue. After reviewing specific data, I still maintain that ~~they are~~ responsible for damaging the way teens perceive their appearance. THE MEDIA IS

Table 2: Brandito's Scoring Breakdown for Phrases

Phrase	Correct/Incorrect Usage
After examining the issues	Correct
I agree/disagree	Correct
One reason I maintain the position	Correct
The article on	Incorrect
For example	Correct
Proponents/opponents	Incorrect
I am also opposed to/in favor of	Incorrect
[author] emphasizes	Correct
One particularly ___ statistic	Correct
Whether __ will remain controversial	Incorrect
After reviewing the data	Correct

Brandito used seven of the eleven given phrases correctly. Five was the class average.

Here, Brandito has fared better than Banana did, but similar problems are in effect – missing transitional phrases and words.

Brandito has scored on the higher end of the spectrum, but still has some issues that make his writing difficult to decipher. He has a better overall command of academic language than Banana had, but does this make him a successful writer? Will this writing be beneficial to him in the future? Perhaps, this is vocabulary at its most formal, and formal vocabulary is necessary for his success in future life skills and experiences. His comprehension of words like “oppose” and “favor” are lacking, and he has forgotten several connecting words that make it difficult to really get into his writing to read for content.

Brandito’s barely passing score using academic language phrases (63%) shows that his technical skills being measured are lacking. And yet, his score is a passing grade, and he was among the top students that scored highest. Transitional phrases and word comprehension caused him multiple problems, same as Banana. Bottom line? His paper is somewhat incomprehensible because of the types of errors, and it distracts from being able to detect his style.

How does Voice factor in?

While comparing Banana’s and Brandito’s work, an alarming issue drifts to the surface. Banana and Brandito are two of 33 students in an English Language Learner support class. Notice how similar the two pieces of work are? The teacher I work with posts student work on the wall, and essays that receive high scores get posted on the bulletin boards. Every essay is a riff on the one right next to it – students are able to see that their work is no more original than their classmates’, or from period 5’s. If we are encouraging them to be strong writers, why are we telling 33 students (in one class) to write the same thing? Strong writers have independent thought and unique style flowing through their pages, not regurgitated facts that every other freshman English Language Learner has spit out on their own assignment.

This activity is designed to provide students with the basic skills of crafting an argumentative essay– argument, topic, evidence, reasons, etc. If the students are having trouble articulating those, then it looks as if the assignment is not meeting its desired learning objective.

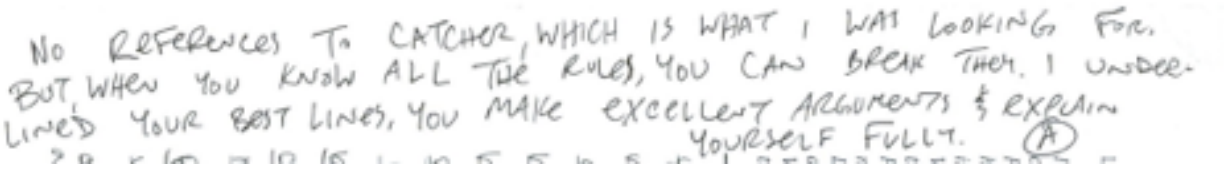
In choosing Banana’s and Brandito’s work, I wanted to highlight the type of work students with wildly different academic performances are giving. Banana has the lowest grade in the class – here she

shows that she is capable of slightly outperforming the class average. Brandito has the highest grade in the class – here he shows that he is on the upper end of the spectrum, but still not dominating.

Artifact 8 – Chandler & The Changing of the Guard

Chandler is a student that speaks with strength and confidence, can debate to the death, and writes high-level, academic language-filled, content-driven papers. She knows all the rules, and writes in a voice that is hers and hers alone.

On this particular assignment, my students had just finished reading *Catcher in the Rye* and I spent a day lecturing about the novel's place in history, focusing on the unfortunate events surrounding Mark David Chapman and John Lennon at the Dakota building in New York City. I showed my students a copy of a letter Chapman wrote to his arresting officer, telling him about how he was a real-life Holden Caulfield and that the book was his statement. I asked the students to write a letter back to Chapman from the perspective of Yoko Ono, using their knowledge and interpretation of the novel to back up their arguments. Once they turned in their letters, I provided written feedback on their assignments. This is the feedback I gave Chandler:



Chandler takes a lot of pride in her work, and when she didn't finish at the end of the period, she asked to take it home with her to finish. I agreed, and graded it the following day. She had written a very moving and emotional letter, and showed enough strength to shoot convincing holes in Chapman's argument. Chandler did not include any references to the novel, she went straight for human reasoning and logic to make her point. Because she made her point so convincingly by appealing to logic, I felt she earned an A despite her lack of textual references. I noted in her feedback, "No references to *Catcher* which is what I was looking for, but when you know all the rules, you can break them." I passed the assignment back to her, and moved on.

About a week later, during a master's group meeting, a mate brought up the ol' "You've got to learn to walk before you can dance" argument which had been zooming around in my brain for the past few months. I started to repeat my usual litany of how you can't have a strong paper without voice, but I noticed that my arguments were weaker. I couldn't conjure up the dire enthusiasm I had had for the postcards, and didn't quite believe my claims that technical skills were unnecessary for the future of a successful writer.

I thought back to the paragraph skeletons Banana and Brandito filled out, assignments I had previously dismissed as nothing more than a more academic version of Mad-Libs. Yes, there was no opportunity for those students to develop a voice of their own within that assignment, but those students were having a tough enough time remembering articles and parts of speech. How could those students become effective writers *without* such a lesson? What could they write if they didn't know how?

I blathered about this at length during master's group, and muttered something about wishing I had an artifact that could exemplify this new, changed thought. Slowly, like drifting up from the depths of a murky bog, I remembered the feedback I gave Chandler on her Mark David Chapman letter. The next day I asked her for it with crossed fingers, and she, being the organization queen that she is, pulled it neatly out of her prom-photo festooned binder.

Analysis for this artifact was different than from the postcards or the paragraph skeletons. I wasn't checking for voice or mechanics, I gave it a look to exactly what my feedback was, what I commended her for and how I phrased it. Having just been speaking of the "You've got to learned to walk before you can dance" argument, I was amused to see my feedback of, "No references to *Catcher* which is what I was looking for, but when you know all the rules, you can break them." Because she had mastery of basic mechanics and ways to effectively debate and argue in a paper, I felt that the strength of her arguments and effective way of crafting her thesis and claims made up for her lack of textual references. If her claims had been weak of her thesis less well-structured, than I would have docked her points and would have given her criticism regarding her not using the book in her arguments. I see this artifact as exemplifying

my changing thought process. Where I once thought that learning individual style always triumphed over mechanics, I am stating clearly here, on a student's paper, that because she knows the "rules" so well, it makes up for her deficiency in other areas.

Rationale

The rationale behind analyzing the English Language Learners' work was to provide artifacts that were specifically designed to enhance a writer's technical skills: thesis, evidence, facts, reasoning, etc. Chandler's feedback was included as artifact in order to illustrate my evolving perspective.

Rounds of Analysis

For Banana's and Brandito's paragraph skeletons, each artifact's first round of analysis was for mechanics. Due to the fact that I spent all of Chapter One looking solely at voice, I wanted this chapter's artifacts to be focused on mechanics. Once Banana's and Brandito's work was decoded for a score in their usage of specific phrases, their work was analyzed again to see what traces of voice could be found. Even though this chapter was focusing more heavily on mechanics, I wanted to see what stylistic choices could be gleaned from an assignment so rooted in technical skill work.

For Chandler's feedback, I analyzed it for my own words, and for my changing thought process. This artifact did not receive multiple rounds of analysis due to its brevity and unique nature in the artifact food chain. I included this artifact because I thought it was a solid representation of my changing thought process – from Chapter One's "Voice above all!" mentality to Chapter Two's revelation of the importance of coherent sentences.

New Thoughts

I had previously thought that writing mechanics were important, but a mere look at Banana's and Brandito's papers, and saw my comments on Chandler's letter, I realized that I was entering a new realm of thought, that while I would love to read engaging, interesting, true to life, unique stories and arguments from students, I would be tearing my rapidly thinning hair out if it was one giant nebulous mass of words without any cares for structure, grammar, and spelling. I gave Jordan the critique of "No references to

Catcher which is what I was looking for, but when you know all the rules, you can break them." I am clearly changing tack on my thoughts about the so-called "rules." After Chapter One, I really wanted voice to triumph in my artifact collecting, as I thought it was the most important piece of writing. If you don't have anything to say, why would I want to read it? However, seeing Banana's and Brandito's struggles establishing credibility as an author through the use of their mechanics got my brain turning over the importance of mechanics. How does the use of mechanics affect the writer's voice? How does the writer's voice affect mechanics?

While I have still stayed strong on the importance of the Individual/Personal tag, the Impersonal section's emphasis rose dramatically, almost to a same level as Individual/Personal (though not quite the same – Individual/Personal is in 15 pt. font, Impersonal is in 14 pt font. These distinctions are important!) In the meantime, Chapter Two did not mention the Interpersonal tag as much – Type of Assignment got put on the backburner due to my surge in interest for technical skills.

Conección

Connecting to the previous artifacts, these are strict, in-class assignments that are designed to specifically prepare students for argumentative writing. Chapter one's artifacts were free-form letters and assignments that the students dreamed up on their own, and crafted much independent thought on their own. Chapter Two's artifacts from the EL class showed marginal independent thought, and although I feel it to be a rather messy example of mechanics, the students should probably mess around with the technical skills until they feel comfortable with them. The artifact referencing Chandler's feedback showed that while her writer's voice helped earn her an A on the assignment, I was still measuring her technical skill set. My ideas about writing are evolving at this point, taking into consideration coherence and use of skills

Did any of Chapter One's questions become more illuminated?

At the end of Chapter One, I posed several questions that had been on my mind and that were helping set the groundwork for Chapter Two. I wanted to revisit those questions and see if I had found any information that could relate.

- *Is a writer's voice an innate ability, or is it developed over time?* Possibly. Banana and Brandito are still trying to discover their own voice as they learn to master the technical rules. Chandler has mastered the rules, and has obviously been developing her voice. However, I don't think I can measure innate ability in a student.
- *How are students taught to write?* I've discovered variety of ways, though I would say that the students are taught technical skills first and foremost. Once the mastery of those skills are completed, they must continue to prove them in a wider array of tasks, some of the time which involve voice (i.e. the Mark David Chapman letter.)
- *It would seem that more teaching time is spent on technical skills; is there a belief that those are the only skills that are important post-high school*? Not according to the U.S. Department of Education or the Bren Communication Center.
- *How does the type of assignment affect voice and mechanics?* No further information.
- *Prompts – everyone loves to respond to a good prompt; how to make sure your writing assignment hits everyone?* No further information.

Questions, Questions, Always More Questions

Same deal as the end of Chapter One. These questions surfaced while finishing up the end of Chapter Two, and helped to provide guidance for Chapter Three.

- *Which is more beneficial, skills-based writing or style-based writing?*
- *Whose definition of beneficial matters most? The teacher or the student?*
- *If an assignment has gaping holes in it, why give it?*

- *What is the most effective method of teaching writing mechanics?*
- *What is the most effective method of learning writing mechanics?*
- *Why are we teaching children to write identically to one another?*

END OF DAYS

Essential Question – How does writer's voice help in bringing out technical skills and how do technical skills help in bringing out writer's voice?

Much like Chapter Two, I was feeling pretty stumped about how to wrap this big enchilada up. I had some artifacts I had collected throughout the year, but wasn't quite sure which one would be effective for the grand finale. After Chapter Two's essential question asking whether mechanics or voice are more beneficial for students to learn and leaning towards a 50/50 split, I was treading water on where to head. At the chapter two peer review, when my group's facilitator asked me how far along I was on chapter 3, I responded with, "Nada." She answered me with, "My friendly advice to you? Get cracking."

So, that meant of course that I bumped along blindly for the next two weeks, until I stumbled upon an avenue. I was the lucky co-Winner Winner Chicken Dinner courtesy of the California Retired Teacher's Association scholarship, however, as pumped as I was to inflate my bank account, I was pretty bummed to have to go to the awards dinner at the Vista Del Monte Retirement Community cafeteria.

Yep, I'm an ungrateful jerk.

Profe, my classmate and educational essay-writing equivalent, attended the reception as well, and we sat and made conversation with our dinner companions about libraries, the rigors of plane travel, and how 5PM dinners aided in the digestion process. The sickly sweet raspberry vinaigrette made a queasy combination with the white Velveeta sauce drowning the breaded Chicken Cordon Bleu, and Profe and I gulped our one glass of Merlot as we discussed whether or not The Hunger Games was an appropriate novel for junior high students.

During this spirited debate, a UCSB professor arrived and was seated at our table. Profe and I began discussing our job hunting experiences with her as she gave us tips and tricks, and told us to hang in there. A lull in the conversation developed, and she looked at me and asked, "So Dominic, what are you writing your master's thesis on?"

Ah yes, the most dreaded question of all.

"Well, over the years I've kept up a bit of a correspondence with some students from back in my substitute teaching heyday, and I was always pretty amazed at how candid, funny, personable, and engaging these letters were considering they weren't a school assignment. So it got me thinking about writing stylistically, and how I find it very rare to find school lessons devoted to each student developing their own writer's voice. So, chapter one is a study of writer's voice, and how I believe that voice should be taught exclusively in writing education. Once I started collecting artifacts in the schools, I found a series of assignments that deal exclusively with the teaching of mechanics, no room for style or playing with individuality, only exercises in transitional phrases, theses, and counter-arguments. When I brought those into the picture, my question started to morph into 'What is more beneficial for students to learn? Stylistic or mechanical skills?"

I let out a deep breath.

"I see. Well Dominic, that is interesting and all, but I believe a more intriguing question would be 'How do stylistic skills inform writing mechanics, and how do the mechanics inform a writer's style?' That way you could study the effect each one has on each other, and see how students utilize the skills learned to craft their writing!"

"Hahahaha! Yes, well, that is interesting, but changing my question at the eleventh hour is not something that would be conducive for me to get work done."

"But you see, your question is a bad question."

"Oh! Why thank you!"

"But it is a bad question! You're never going to be able to answer it!"

"From what our masters professor has been preaching this last year, it sounded to me like you weren't supposed to answer your question…"

"Well, yes, but the question of what is more beneficial for students to learn, mechanics or style, is never-ending! That debate will always go in a circle, and you want something that will spur you forward in your thinking, not keep you running around a track."

She stared at me, and I stared back at her, and we remained that way until the waiter dropped off our Devil's Food dessert.

On the way home after that interminable evening, I was thinking about what she said, thinking about postponing the MEd, cancelling it altogether, paying someone to write it for me, you know, the usual escape plans people concoct when they're enjoying the scenery of the creek and then realize that they've left the paddle glistening on the shore.

And then I remembered Seabass.

Sebastian is probably my most intellectually gifted student. His glasses constantly slide down his nose and his dusty old Army jacket billows out like a sheet when he throws his arms open to give Mr. Kiwi and myself hugs every Friday. Good ol' Seabass draws detailed portraits of ancient foreign warriors and drinks Coca Cola out of glass bottles. When Mr. Kiwi pleaded with the class to "not believe all the left-wing radicalism spouted by the UCs, and don't believe the right wing bull proposed by the news and media outlets. Learn the facts, then make your opinion." Seabass replied in front of everyone that, "You're the only teacher I've ever had who clearly states that you want to teach us pure knowledge." Seabass takes his education very seriously, and views writing assignments as incredibly important to the development of his history-obsessed brain.

When he popped into my head on that drive back from the retirement home dinner, his essay flashed before my eyes. I got home, and before passing out in bed that night, I scrawled a note to myself that looked like this:

SEABASS WRITING
how does wrtg style affect mechs?

<u>VICE VERSA</u>

Seabass uses very distinct punc & paragraphing
to get pt across

So, Seabass' weekly research writing assignment became my chapter three artifact. For homework each week, Kiwi assigns students "weekly research" where students must write a paragraph based on research of a topic of their choosing. Students have chosen such diverse subjects as Adolf Hitler, pasta, Rihanna, and lip stick. Seabass typically writes about historical events, and usually turns in 8 page single spaced reports, with his research detailing the Siege of Leningrad or Lewis & Clark's expedition through the Louisiana Purchase. However, he turned in the following piece of writing in lieu of weekly research.

I collected this artifact when Seabass turned it in for homework in my 11th grade Honors English class. Ordinarily, weekly research is given a quick skim to make sure it is not copied directly off Wikipedia and scrawled with a hasty "GOOD." However, noticing that this piece of work was a bit different – three pages, second page almost blank, and the word "Research" was deliberately X'ed out at the top of the page. In the 20 seconds I took to glance it over, I decided that it looked unique enough to warrant a double take, and seeing "It's life." centered by itself on the second page made me think that Seabass wanted some genuine feedback on his assignment.

I collected this particular assignment because even from a cursory glance, I could tell that this was different than the other assignments that gave a history of how the donut was created, and listed all the different varieties one can order. Most students typically do a rush job or the bare minimum on this assignment, which is why I didn't select their work as artifacts.

First Round – Mechanics

I decided to begin this first round of analysis by looking solely at his writing mechanics. I chose to start with this because at the end of Chapter 2, I had noticed my thought process changing to how mechanics lead the paper's comprehensibility, as opposed to voice. Seabass' technical skills with writing are top notch. I went through his paper line by line and counted up his grammatical, spelling, and punctuation mistakes. Out of 72 lines of text, 11 lines had a mistake. Three lines had typos, identified in Figure 12. Seabass, in four different sentences, wrote "bias" in place of "biased." The only misspelled word

within the paper is “simplisticly.” The other mistakes are a missed apostrophe in the last paragraph in the word “high schoolers” and he forgot to use the article “a” in “I am 16-year-old teenager…” at the end of the first page. Although there are 11 mistakes, I would still give him high marks for mechanics being that his mistakes seem to mostly be a result of hasty typing and a lack of proofreading. If this assignment were given a grade, I would still score him high for mechanics, but would give written feedback about the necessity of proof reading. The only gaps in knowledge I can see are the difference between “bias” and “biased,” how to spell the word “simplistically,” and that he should have shown possession when talking about a “high schooler’s essay.” Seabass’ handwritten work in class has been pitch perfect and because of the strength of the rest of his paper, I feel that his technical skills can still be considered strong. His mistakes were not worrisome enough to warrant extra attention to his errors, and due to the strength of the rest of his classwork, seemed to me that he didn’t have time to proofread.

Speaking now on successful uses of mechanics. He gets off to a unique start when his heading of “Weekly Research #16” has been deliberately doctored to read “Weekly Idea #1.” There is an X crossing out “Research” and “6”, cleverly displaying his thought that this will be a departure from the usual topics he has written about.

Capitalization, bold words, and italics are some of Seabass’ mainstays of making a strong point. When he discusses what he would like to be doing, he says,

> “I would love to be pursuing what I think is what I want to do for a career RIGHT NOW in high school.”

Seabass is playing with tone and capitalization here, making a strong statement regarding timing. The formatting of this paper is exceptionally unique – what follows details his usage of paragraphing and structuring. Between the first and second paragraphs, Seabass has broken away from the paragraph format to put further emphasis on his essential question for the paper:

"How can you live through this routine of life everyday full knowingly that there is so much more knowledge outside the classroom, outside your job, outside of judgment?"

The depth and wonder of his question are further brought about by the spacing.

After this comes, what I believe to be, the most unique and interesting part of his paper. When I skimmed his assignment when he first turned it in, this was the piece that made me do a double-take, and file it away for potential further use as an artifact of some sort. At the end of the first page, he writes, "I am 16-year-old teenager, and you know what I can't wait for? It's not a car, or a relationship, or even Christmas break." When the page is turned, the second page is almost completely blank; except for two words, strategically center-aligned in the middle of the page:

"It's life."

Again, Seabass' spacing and alignment is deliberate and effective, and makes a very strong statement regarding his epiphany and thoughts on his current ideas. Not to mention the fact that he took an entire page to showcase his revelation.

The last page of his essay has the same flow of mechanics as the first page had, certain phrases are emphasized by capitalizing all the letters within the word. I did think his usage of apostrophes where he wrote,

"I mean living as in learning, expanding your knowledge to know the 'why' and 'how' of things though the wonderful thing of time"

was impressive, as he was emphasizing the words in a different way from how he had it before, and in a more formal way than putting words in bold or capitalization. Sebastian's paper used both formal and informal styles of technical skills, yet all were used strategically and correctly, aside from typos and forgotten words.

Throughout, Seabass' vocabulary is top-notch. He uses exceptional words and phrases, such as "meandering," "simplisticly," (sic) "astonishing," "ideologies," "fundamental," "bias," among others. Grading on vocabulary, I would give Seabass full marks for his word choices.

Second Round – Voice

I decided to begin this second round of analysis by looking solely at his writer's voice. I chose to do this round of analysis second because at the end of Chapter 2, I had noticed my thought process changing to how mechanics lead the paper's comprehensibility, as opposed to voice.

Seabass writes as though he is having a conversation with myself or with Mr. Kiwi, as evidenced with,

> "After reading the first page of The Great Gatsby, the only thing that probably struck me the whole book (Sorry to say because I know you're trying to teach me something) is that second paragraph…"

Because of this conversational tone, Seabass is able to express more of himself and his identity throughout the writing. Sentences and questions like,

> "It bugs me that sometimes the only people I can talk to about such ideas are either people in college or adults who know what I'm talking about"

and

> "It is amazing the amount of knowledge in each and every person. And to judge them on first sight? What gives you the right to do so anyhow?"

again strike with his conversational tone, and provide the reader with a strong relationship with his writing.

At the end of the first page, (as mentioned above), where he wrote,

> "I am 16-year-old teenager, and you what I can't wait for? It's not a car, or a relationship, or even Christmas break,"

then skips to the next page, and dramatically writes

> "It's life."

in the center of the page as the ultimate defining moment of the paper.

Seabass, while writing about his views on life, does not deliver a report on his findings. Instead, he writes this almost the way one would write a letter.

> "Anyways, before I get off topic like the attention span of a squirrel, I just want to say that though I am learning bias ideas is high school, all I need to do is think about all the possibilities on all scales of truth."

This is phrased with the reader in mind, forcing them to interact with *his* opinion. He closes with,

> "Phew! Thanks for reading this very meandering, strange, opinionated idea of mine. I hope I didn't crack your bubble or something, though I highly doubt a high schoolers (sic) essay can do that. But whatever. I just want someone to read the idea and give me a good response to it, give it some validity. In all honest truth, I actually DO want Christmas Break because that's always fun!"

Just as he eased the reader into the paper with an eye to inviting the reader into the piece, he eased the reader out of the paper with a note describing his writing, and what he hopes will happen after someone reads his work.

Third Round – How Voice and Mechanics work together

I decided to begin this third round of analysis by looking for ways that Seabass' writing reflected a combination of voice and mechanics used at the same time. I chose to do this round of analysis second because, compared to the voice-filled postcards of Chapter 1 and the technical skill-laden paragraph skeletons of Chapter 2, Seabass' work reflected a mesh of both skills, which I felt would help my final essential question. Having sifted through 'What constitutes a successful writer?' where and 'What is most beneficial for students, learning mechanics or learning voice?' this analytical round in the ring would help investigate 'How does writer's voice help in bringing out technical skills and how do technical skills help in bring out writer's voice?'

I found the most overwhelming evidence of voice and mechanics working in tandem with each other. Seabass has taken the whole entire second page of his three page paper to express his revelation of what he is waiting for:

"It's life."

Simple and straight-forward, his writing style takes a marked departure from his usual verbose statements. However, because it is so understated and so unexpected, it packs even more of a punch. Why did he structure this page like so? Was he simply trying to make his point? Had he simply filled the first sheet of paper and was going to move on to the second page anyway? Is he being melodramatic? Is he really *that* unique of a writer?

The second page's layout can be seen as a technical choice by the writer; utilizing one whole page for two words, center-aligned. It can also be seen as a stylistic choice; short, staccato phrase, which follows a rather lengthy and wordy explanation.

Seabass meshes the two entities together. Without his technical choices regarding layout, the paper would end up being two pages and not pack the same eye-catching punch. It would look like one and a half pages of text. Nothing more, nothing less. Without his stylistic choices regarding syntax, the simplistic feel of the second page's words would have been lost. Had he added in more details or a few more sentences to describe his thoughts, the emotional pull the two-word phrase has on the reader would have been lost. Seabass had been utilizing a strong vocabulary and a mix of complex and compound sentences throughout the first half of the paper, so the sudden shift mixes up both his voice and the mechanics the reader has become accustomed to seeing. This brings to mind Gary Provost's quote about sentence length discussed on page four of Chapter Two, which helps to take the writing out of the normal realm of a list of sentences, and provides a flow for the reader to ease in and out of.

Some new questions bubbled up after this round of analysis. While this writing is pleasing to read, is it the ideal? Should all students be taught to write like this? If they are all taught to write like this, wouldn't individual voice go out the window? Instead of looking at this artifact as the pinnacle of Writer's Voice, I believe this should be looked at as an example of Seabass' Voice, and the student commended for having found a unique style that works for him.

I had previously been under the misinterpretation that once you find an example of voice, you had a handy example to effectively show students to teach voice. While you can still show them examples, you run the risk of students emulating and copying that style instead of developing their own. This round of analysis revealed this by showing how unique Seabass' writing was, and that if I were to teach students using this as an example for the ideal in writer's voice, I would just be teaching them to imitate. Which then leads to another essential question:

What is the best way to teach individualized voice to students?

I will probably have to write a dissertation to find the answer to that question.

NOT GONNA HAPPEN.

I chose to focus on Seabass' second page because I felt it was the strongest example of a mix of mechanics and voice within the paper. I chose not to focus on phrases within the text because I felt that I had already gone over those examples previously in the first and second rounds of analysis.

Typos in Seabass' artifact

"…I bet you are already wandering what I am…"
"…and its people since hey have had their time…"
"…even the world's most

Awkward Phrasing

"How can you live through this routine of life everyday full knowingly that there is so much more knowledge…"

Conversational Tone

"You know, I bet you are already wandering (sic) what I am going to write about and to tell you the truth, I kind of like that idea."

"It's life."

I was no longer discussing type of assignment (Interpersonal) in the inquiry outright, but seeing how Seabass reinterpreted the assignment and the difficulties Banana and Brandito had with the paragraph skeletons, the type of assignment does matter a great deal. However, it is a different entity than Voice and Technical Skills, so while the type of assignment is a link to the two, it's has transformed the triple eight into a smaller length but more bulbous circle. This can show that the type of assignment links voice and technical skills, but has a different relationship; it is more of a guide on how to use those skills instead an outright skillset of its own. The Individual/Personal and Impersonal ovals are now holding equal weight (both in 15 pt. font.) Neither entity is overlapping the other showing that one is more important than the other – they are all equal.

Conección

Seabass' writing conjures up images of Chapter One's postcards; Rebel talking about how it doesn't get much more American than a good ol' fashioned make-out session or Baby Bjorn talking about his 90 mile hike "of epicness." Those students' ideas and words were memorable and original, as well. Linking to the paragraph skeletons, Seabass already had enough practice with those types of activities, or picked up those skills quickly early on. He has a good working knowledge of technical skills. Since he has that good working knowledge, he can be placed alongside Chandler in the realm of knowing the rules first in order to break them. While he didn't follow the prompt of a typical Weekly Research assignment, his creativity and critical thinking skills helped edge this paper into a more memorable piece.

Did I find more information on Chapter One's or Two's questions?

Did I find any new or additional responses?

At the end of Chapter One, I posed several questions that had been on my mind and that were helping set the groundwork for Chapter Two. I wanted to revisit those questions of both chapters and see if I had found any information that could relate.

(Chapter Three findings are underlined.)

- *Is a writer's voice an innate ability, or is it developed over time?* Possibly. Banana and Brandito are still learning to master the technical rules, and will hopefully move on to master individual techniques soon. Chandler has mastered the rules, and had been developing her voice prior to this year of school (her writer's voice was firmly in place at the start of the school year.) However, I don't think I can measure innate ability in a student. I would probably have to say that both of these scenarios are plausible. While Seabass may have indeed started out a strong writer as a boy, it is equally possible his voice developed over time. I saw voice within another student's essay increase from October to June from standard, generic phrasing, to stylistic, individual writing craft. Whatever the student brings to the table is what you need to work with.
- *How are students taught to write?* A variety of ways, though I would say that the students are taught technical skills first and foremost. Once the mastery of those skills are completed, they must continue to prove them in a wider array of tasks, some of the time which involve voice (ie, the Mark David Chapman letter.) Through cross-training! Give them paragraph skeletons, paragraphs, timed writes, formal essays, letters, postcards, free writes, argumentative essays. Teach the student to write in a variety of disciplines, and the student will have that many more tricks up the sleeve.
- *It would seem that more teaching time is spent on technical skills, is there a belief that those are the only skills that are important post-high school*? No, not according to the U.S. Department of Education or the Bren Communication Center. Neither is it according to Mr. Kiwi's writing rubric. Voice and technical skills are given equal weight.
- *How does the type of assignment affect voice or mechanics?* Unanswered. Annnnnd, it depends on the assignment. Give the class a quick write, some students will need to their pencil pried out of their fingers, others you will need to pry a pencil into their fingers. Same with comprehension questions. It depends on the assignment given.

- *Questions – everyone loves to respond to a good question; how to make sure your writing question hits everyone?* Unanswered. While I think a good question helps the writing process, I would amend my question to "everyone loves to respond to a good prompt." The prompt surrounding the Mark David Chapman letter was extremely high-engagement due to the controversial and notorious nature of the story behind it, which helped the students to put forth a good, solid effort. And, you can never underestimate the power of the free write prompt… Although, Seabass flourished on this assignment, most of the class did not. Which still leaves "*how to make sure your writing question hits everyone?"* unanswered.
- Which is more beneficial, skills-based writing or style-based writing? EQUAL! The ideal is when you get them to work hand in hand. You can't have one without the other.
- Whose definition of beneficial matters most? The teacher or the student? This is a bit of a chicken and the egg scenario. The student will take what is given to him and make the best of it with his own talents. However, it is up to the teacher to provide the necessary skills in order to make sure "beneficial" helps each and every student.
- If an assignment has gaping holes in it, why give it? No further information.
- What is the most effective method of teaching writing mechanics? No further information.
- What is the most effective method of learning writer's voice? It fluctuates. This is where the type of assignment is critical. From this inquiry, we can see how non-school assignments (postcards) showed a wealth of voice throughout. The paragraph skeletons did not leave room for voice. However, when students like Rebel and Seabass put a spin on a routine writing assignment, it leads to more voice being showcased within the work. How to tell students to break the rules in order to let them practice developing their own style?
- Why are we teaching children to write identically to one another? It seems that this is for purposes of grading and assessment.

Questions to carry Onward

These are some thoughts that I will take with me after this inquiry.

- *Why are we teaching children to write identically to one another?*
- *What is the best way to explain voice to students? Show examples? Give several definitions? Give creative writing drills?*
- *At what school age do writing mechanics drills become rote?*
- *How do you show students ways to incorporate voice into their mechanics, and vice versa.*
- *What types of writers are we hoping students will become?*

Literature Review

Introduction

My inquiry had led me to realize that my students need ways to increase their conceptual understanding and spend time practicing writing techniques throughout a variety of different activities. I began this opus with the idea that having students develop their own writer's voice is much more critical than to have them develop their writing mechanics, and ended 60 pages later concluding that both skill sets are necessary for a well-rounded, proficient writer.

At the end of Chapter Three, when I was slapping my conclusions down on the keyboard, I discussed the idea that what students needed the most was cross-training, where students write in an array of wildly different tasks (summaries, argumentative essays, poems, narratives, lists, notes, etc.) In exercise, if a person only runs, he will only work out those muscle groups associated with running. They will become exceptionally strong of course, but the muscles not being used will stay stagnant or wither. If a person wants a fully developed, well-rounded exercise regime, one should run, then swim, then weight train, bike, stretch, expose their body to all the different ways one can strengthen, and their physical health will be that much more developed and able for any feat. If students are only taught the skills required to create a strong persuasive essay, there may be no stopping them when it comes to their persuasive tactics. But, how about if they need to craft an informational essay? Or an argumentative one? Write a love letter? A cover letter? A thank you note? A resume? Give them tasks that will help in all areas, and their writing skills will strengthen holistically.

In Writing Next: Effective Strategies to Improve Writing of Adolescents in Middle and High Schools (Steve Graham & Dolores Perin, 2007), the authors detail eleven different writing techniques that help stimulate and strengthen a student's writing ability. Reading this delighted me in that it deals with an even larger array of writing techniques I had previously thought of or devised, and is a mesh of both lessons in voice and technical skill development. I have written notes below the strategies I feel have directly affected my thinking and development during this inquiry.

Writing Next

In the article, Graham and Perin elaborate on eleven different practices which have been proven to be effective writing tools for students. They are, as follows:

1. Writing Strategies, which involves teaching students strategies for planning, revising, and editing their compositions.
2. Summarization, which involves explicitly and systematically teaching students how to summarize texts.
3. Collaborative Writing, which uses instructional arrangements in which adolescents work together to plan, draft, revise, and edit their compositions.

These three techniques fit neatly in with my Chapter Two revelations about technical skills. It further strengthens my evolved thoughts regarding the importance of the mastery of mechanics. Without these three entities, students' writing would be a globular mess that would be near impossible to read.

1. Specific Product Goals, which assigns students specific, reachable goals for the writing they are to complete.

I had not previously thought of this as a writing tool, but I can see the benefit for the purpose of showing students the relevance of why their writing matters. Show them explicitly what you want them to impart in their writing, and I would imagine this focus would lead to more engaged writing.

1. Word Processing, which uses computers and word processors as instructional supports for writing assignments.
2. Sentence Combining, which involves teaching students to construct more complex, sophisticated sentences.

3. Prewriting, which engages students in activities designed to help them generate or organize ideas for their composition.

Allow students to do a brain dump. Style, tone, organization – it is all up to them, and it will allow them to connect with the material on their own terms. This further strengthens my argument about voice being a critical piece of the writing process.

1. Inquiry Activities, which engages students in analyzing immediate, concrete data to help them develop ideas and content for a particular writing task.

I believe that this activity can help with both technical and stylistic elements. If I were to give my students pieces of writing to measure for technical components (which I have done often), I should also give them writing to measure for stylistic choices (which I have done rarely.) Odd that I have not used this technique with voice more often, but I'm only getting warmed up!

1. Process Writing Approach, which interweaves a number of writing instructional activities in a workshop environment that stresses extended writing opportunities, writing for authentic audiences, personalized instruction, and cycles of writing.

Cross training! Have the students write in a variety of ways, their entire writing muscle will be trained and strengthened.

1. Study of Models, which provides students with opportunities to read, analyze, and emulate models of good writing.

Similar to Inquiry Activities, if I were to give my students strong examples of mechanics and voice, then they might actually start emulating those examples. I would want to stress that they can use them as guidelines, not as rules; I don't want students to copy the examples I provide, so I would need to keep a

close eye on that. But, some students have a tendency to learn by example, so why not provide them with examples of all types of good writing?

1. Writing for Content Learning, which uses writing as a tool for learning content material.

How these models have worked in my classroom

Some of these are techniques I have used in my classroom, to great success. I find Prewriting to be extremely valuable in helping students connect with a piece of literature or as an introduction to a greater writing project. For example, on the first day I was introducing the novel *Tortilla Curtain* to my 11th grade Honors English students, the opening pages introduce the main characters in the midst of a car accident. In order to generate more interest in the novel and to have them make connections to the literature, I had my students write a paragraph describing a car accident. They were then told to keep those writing assignments to use for future reference when they wrote their final papers on the novel. When I read their final papers, it was remarkable seeing how one third of the class of 38 used those first day prewrites in their final papers written over one month later.

How I found Graham and Perin's piece to be most beneficial is that it published a large amount of technical skill-heavy lessons. Prewrites are great, and for someone like me who finds voice to be extremely important in cultivating a writing style, they can be an excellent tool for the classroom. However, prewrites are only one tiny piece of the great big pie. Lessons on sentence combining will help students become more competent and sophisticated in their tone. Inquiry activities will help students to gauge how to read a variety of different texts, an exceptionally useful tool when working in any content area. These ideas further hammer home my theory on cross-training; give the students a variety of ways to practice their writing, and they will become more adept. As Graham and Perin state in the article, "No single approach to writing instruction will meet the needs of all students."

Way of the Future?

Being one of the stronger students in the classroom when I was in high school, I typically hated group work. It usually meant that I was the one who had to be in charge and pick up the slack when other students dropped the ball. Ironically enough, during this last year of student teaching, I found myself employing group work quite often to have students collaborate and interact. I found it beneficial for students to speak with each other as they were working on writing activities in order to bounce ideas surrounding content and mechanics. Seeing students check in with their neighbor on spelling and vocabulary questions was quite heartening to see that I maybe was on the right track. With Collaborative Writing being on the list, it confirmed that I was making some good decisions. With today's classroom having an equal emphasis placed on group assignments as it does on individual ones, it will be imperative to slip more of these lessons into the curriculum. If students are learning in groups, then they will need to be developing style and mechanics in groups. In *Notebooks of the Mind,* John-Steiner writes,

> Learning by being with a knowledgeable partner is a more effective method of developing a particular language of thought than learning from these books, classes, or science shows. The crucial aspect of these informal or formal apprenticeships is that they provide the beginner with insights into both the overt activities of human productivity and into the more hidden inner processes of thought. (1985, p. 200)

When I read this, I immediately thought it was ridiculous at first because I had originally thought of the development of writer's voice as an individual journey, one that students must take on by themselves. But, that is an Old World model of teaching. Yes, my classroom was filled with Timed Writes and formal essays, but those were not the lessons that I asked the administration to come to watch and observe. I asked them to come in for group work lessons, days where students were given a set of writing tasks and asked to work collaboratively. Maybe writing style shouldn't be developed in a dark corner by candlelight. Maybe we've made writing too solitary of an activity for social students to actually enjoy, and that is a reason for some of the struggling writers running around the world these days. Maybe, if we can

harness the power of group work and encourage students to discuss and debate their concepts and ideas surrounding writing, then we can start to see a resurgence of a generation of strong and talented writers.

Give them technology tools for them to work and manipulate. Assign examples of literature and articles that show the wildly different ways one can be considered a proficient writer. Use the Process Writing Approach to show students just how universal writing is in the world. Use collaborative techniques for planning and revising to show them just how important it is to be able to verbalize your ideas and thoughts into one cohesive, coherent, original thought.

I think *Writing Next* provides an array of ways for students to become comfortable and competent with writing, and John-Steiner hammers it home when he mentions the evolving and growing nature of collaboration in the classroom. With these elements in place, it looks like Dan Brown will have to watch his back.

Last Gasp

Throughout the course of running the master's gauntlet, I have made several discoveries that have helped me to hone in on the shape-shifting beast that is teaching writing.

There is no "one best way" to teach voice to students; each student will be responsible for cultivating their own style, and the teacher will be responsible for providing constant opportunities for them to discover it. As of right now, I believe that the cross-training method of teaching students to write across a variety of different disciplines is the best way for students to strengthen their technical skill set (practice makes perfect!) and to develop their own writing style. If one way doesn't work, move on to the next one. And the next one. And the next one. One of the methods is bound to work with at least one of the students. Keep trying. It will happen.

But is this the one best way? I don't think there ever will be "the one best way" in education. With so many different students and revamping of education practices every few years, it is impossible to think that one overarching education technique will teach writing effectively.

Serve the students a smorgasbord of writing activities, and hopefully their skills will grow and strengthen. Give Brandito sentence frames and paragraph skeletons so that he can practice his mechanics, but also give him quickwrites and journal topics to get him comfortable with writing with his own style. Give Chandler practice with pulling concrete evidence out of the text along with narrative prose questions and analytical essays. Give Seabass proof reading and peer editing to go along with historical haikus and practice cover letters. Let Rebel write in his own unique tone and format for applicable assignments, but give him guidelines for persuasive essay writing as well.

These students have all the goods, they just need to practice and be exposed to all types of writing drills. Technical skills have their place, voice has its place; maybe if we can find ways to tie the two together more often, then students can receive a more holistic writing education.

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