"Good Writing": Defining It and Teaching It

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Abstract
While process-based approaches to writing instruction have emphasized the steps that writers go through to produce a piece of writing, comparatively little scholarship has been devoted to the question of what qualities a finished piece of writing should have. While it is true that writing criteria vary widely across disciplines, genres, and writing situations, there are some rhetorical elements that are generally applicable to any act of structured communication, and recognizing these criteria can help to inform writing instruction and to clarify instructors' expectations for student writing. This article identifies five rhetorical dimensions associated with effective communication, and it outlines specific strategies for providing explicit instruction that encourages students to develop these qualities in their writing.

Keywords
composition; rhetoric; writing across the curriculum; writing process

What is good writing? How do writers know whether or not they are "good" writers? What does it mean for a piece of writing to be "well written" or "effective" or any of the other synonyms that readers – and especially teachers – use to praise the kinds of writing that they like? Over the last 50 years, the process approach to writing instruction has provided enormous insight into how writing should be taught – through the stages of brainstorming, drafting, and revision, with opportunities for peer review, instructor feedback, and self-assessment along the way – but comparatively little has been said about what the outcome of this process should be. Butler (2008) observes that, while discussions about writing style were important to the early process-oriented compositionists, interest in the "product" of writing declined significantly by the mid-1980s, leaving a conspicuous theoretical vacuum regarding questions like, what kind of product should result from the writing process? What goals should student writers be aiming to achieve in their writing? In short, what is good writing?

The easy answer that everyone will agree with is that "good" writing is writing that is factually accurate, written in standard grammar and syntax, and formatted according to the required conventions (in terms of its title page, references, etc.). These objective criteria provide a convenient baseline for answering the question of what makes writing "good," which is why many

instructors who include written assignments in their classes tend to emphasize these mechanical details in their classroom writing instruction and in their feedback to students. Obviously, however, college instructors are asking for something "more" from student writing – something that these objective criteria exist in order to support. We don't want students to write so that they can master grammar and format; we want them to master grammar and format so that they can write "more effectively." But, once again, what does that mean?

If we eliminate plainly objective criteria from the conversation, it is likely that a hundred different educators will give a hundred different answers in response to the question, "What is good writing?" One of the major fault lines will occur between disciplines: the criteria of good writing differ markedly from poetry class to technical writing class, and even from history class to science class. Each discipline has its own stylistic preferences, as does each sub-discipline, each academic publication, and each individual language user. Furthermore, the criteria of what qualifies as "good writing" differ from one writing task to another: papers and essays are subject to one set of rules, while exam answers, lab reports, discussion board posts, and other kinds of assignments have their own expectations. Of course, these days, the word "writing" itself is becoming problematic, as multimedia forms of expression challenge the predominance of the written word in academic coursework. An expanded definition of writing would encompass articulating any expressive or communicative act, be it a website, a YouTube video, a PowerPoint lecture, a research poster, a podcast, a meme, or any other form of mediated self-presentation (Richardson, 2010). This variety, moreover, speaks to the fundamental apprehension that the essence of "good writing" might be ultimately subjective and undefinable and, therefore, un-teachable.

In the absence of a robust understanding of what "good" writing should look and sound like, instructors and students alike tend to resort to generic expressions, many of which, as Reddy (1979) described, are rooted in a falsifying "conduit metaphor" of language, such as, "This paragraph gets your ideas across effectively" or "Try to put this thought into different words." These ubiquitous kinds of locutions, which assume that words act as a "container" for ideas, both misconceptualize the nature of written communication and fail to provide useful insight into what exactly the student has done to merit praise or critique. "Clarity," so often praised by compositionists as a cardinal virtue, is also "neither axiomatic nor transparent" (Barnard, 2010), and, like other features of a "common sense" approach to writing style, disguises and excuses ideological assumptions and perpetuates "an institutional practice of mystery" (Lillis, 1999). The frequently applied adjective "effective," while less inveigled in the conduit metaphor, similarly tends to serve as shorthand for whatever (for whatever unexplained reason) the instructor finds "effective." Faced with this bewildering proliferation of writing styles and formats and with the lack of cohesion among their teachers' expectations, it is no wonder that many students cultivate a fine-tuned dread of writing assignments.

Nauman et al. have written that "Teachers have both a right and a responsibility to determine and discuss their own views of what makes writing good" (Nauman et al., 2011). Any formulation that I managed to communicate, however, would not do justice to the collective dynamic of writing as an endeavor nor allow the students to participate in the process of inquiring into their own experiences and assumptions. For these reasons, I have recently been starting the writing classes I teach by inviting students to share their own insights about what they think good writing is. This conversation acknowledges the sense in which the "effectiveness" of writing is negotiated by a

"rhetorical community" (Zappen et al., 1997). Given the socially constructed nature of writing, it is uniquely appropriate in composition classes to view students (Broz, 1999), "not as receivers of discreet bits of mature knowledge, but as potential scholars in our disciplines developing the ability to enact the craft of our scholarship, creating with us newly interpreted knowledge" (p. 157). I have facilitated this discussion about "good writing" with first-year college students and high school students taking college-level classes, as well as with upper-level students in "advanced" composition courses. The student body at the university where I teach is extremely diverse, composed of a mix of traditional students and adult learners from a wide range of cultural, linguistic, and socio-economic backgrounds. Rather than trying to steer the conversation toward my own preconceived definitions, I have made a genuine effort to let the students teach me, and to identify criteria of "good writing" that held wide currency across the spectrum of individual writers and particular writing situations. As (Fletcher, 2011) explains, inviting students to identify their own "mentor texts" and to "enter into them on their own terms … give[s] students more control. more ownership, and it … respect[s] the transactional dynamic that is present whenever anybody reads anything" (p. 5).

In some classes, I have asked students to locate examples of what they think of as "good writing" and to analyze their own ideas about what makes it good. Students have brought in newspaper editorials, blog posts, academic papers, textbook chapters, personal letters, magazine blurbs, paragraphs from novels, YouTube videos, online product reviews, their own compositions, and a wonderful variety of other textual artefacts to discuss. Asking students to identify these texts themselves provided an opportunity for them to consciously reflect on their own assessment of the nature of "good writing," and it also provided us with a chance to explore the manner in which the definition of what makes writing "good" is a socially-constructed phenomenon. While we couldn't help but encounter a bustling diversity of different tastes, opinions, evaluations, and preferences, I also hoped that we could locate some overarching principles capable of encompassing this variety. Having specific examples of "good writing" to examine, furthermore, allowed us to look closely at specific qualities of the texts and to keep our discussions grounded in actual texts and communicative situations.

While my conversations with other faculty members about the nature of good writing tend to start off with technical details about grammar and paragraph structure, students' responses to the "good writing" they identified literally never mentioned anything about technology usage. Students never identified a writer's punctuation, for example, or sentence structure, as a criterion for assessing their response to a piece of writing. This is worth mentioning because, in composition studies, discussions about the "product" end of writing tend to focus on concrete language features. Landmark articles like Connors (2000) "The Erasure of the Sentence" and MacDonald (2007) "The Erasure of Language" associate a focus on writing style with instruction around grammatical rules and concepts. In my conversations with students, however, the qualities that they responded enthusiastically to in "good" writing had little to do with sentence-level structures. Rather, our conversations delved into the heart of why writers write and why readers read.

As might be expected, the qualities of "good writing" that we discussed were wide-ranging, but, across many conversations of this kind, I have noticed certain recurring themes that seem to emerge inevitably. While I have not made any effort to quantify the results of these conversations, they tend to gravitate toward five key dimensions of rhetoric, and these rhetorical dimensions suggest

evocative prospects for thinking about the kind of intellectual activity we want students to engage in when they write. These five rhetorical dimensions are:

- Fluency – communicative function
- Architecture – cohesive function
- Context – social function
- Enthusiasm – expressive function
- Originality – noetic function

There is nothing definitive about these five rhetorical dimensions – this list could easily be re-worked or pared down or expanded – but any reader or writer will likely recognize the universality of these five "pleasures" afforded by acts of structured communication in any medium or any discipline. While all of these dimensions have been recommended in one way or another by compositionists, the breadth and universality of the rhetorical qualities identified by my students provide a global framework that looks at the "big picture" of writerly effectiveness in a way that is accessible, intuitive, and even measurable. Identifying these specific rhetorical dimensions gave my students and me a useful way to talk about what "good writing" is and what makes it "good," but it also, crucially, suggests a way of arranging writing instruction so that it supports students to develop these aspects of their own writing. The remainder of this essay considers each of these rhetorical dimensions in terms of why it is "good" and how we can teach it.

Fluency

Fluency refers to the writer's ability to use any medium of communication freely, confidently, and even playfully. Verbal fluency is characterized not necessarily by grammatical accuracy (although that may be part of it) but primarily by a spirit of litheness, agility, and sure-footedness. Fluent writers convey the impression that words come naturally to their tongue, while fluency can also be expressed in other media through stylistic adroitness with images, music, text, or any combination of the three. As the word "fluency" suggests, fluent expression suggests a riverine fluidity that carries a reader along with a "flow" of communicative mastery. Elbow (1998) refers to this rhetorical dimension when he describes "the sound of a *meaning* resonating because the individual consciousness of the writer is somehow fully behind or in tune with or in participation with that meaning" (p. 65). Fluency in expression is often a sign that a writer has "tapped into" something deeply felt, and it can provide readers with a sense of being borne along on the writer's cognitive coattails. In the "flow" of fluency, students' writing may deviate from the conventions of Edited American English, or even from English altogether, but inviting this kind of polyvocal into the composition classroom helps emerging writers to connect the act of writing with their own self-perception, while also providing opportunities to articulate "reflections on students' negotiations between composing in a home country language (including variations of English) and composing in academic English" (*CCCC statement on second language writing and writers.*, 2014).

Anyone who has ever had a pleasurable experience as either a reader or a writer is familiar with the power of this kind of fluency, but can it be taught? To be sure, the achievement of writerly fluency tends to be the result of a lifetime of reading and writing and thinking, but once we recognize fluency as a goal, it becomes possible to consider what kinds of scaffolding activities are likely to promote student's capacity for fluent self-expression. These would be assignments

that empower students to write without self-censorship, in whatever idiom comes most naturally to them as language-users.

- Encourage students to write "in their own voice," especially in drafts and process-writing assignments.
- Celebrate expansiveness, risk-taking, and digressions.
- Provide opportunities for unstructured freewriting on topics that students express a personal interest in.
- Identify "fluent" passages in student writing and encourage students to expand on those passages.
- Incorporate "epistolary" assignments, where students write in the form of a letter to a friend, sibling, celebrity, or historical figure.

Architecture

Hemingway (1932) opined that "Prose is architecture, not interior decoration" (p. 191). Indeed, one of the rhetorical dimensions that characterize "good" writing is the sense of a structural component, the impression that the constituent elements are not thrown together at random but are intentionally arranged. As (Flower, 1980) observe, "good writers appear to have more flexible, high-level plans and more self-conscious control of their planning than poor writers" (p. 44). The kinds of structural arrangements possible in writing or in other media vary widely, of course, but "good writing" invariably exhibits self-consciousness about how individual parts relate to a complete whole. Moreover, any act of expression that involves temporal duration – text, video, song, lecture, etc. – has an in-built "beginning-middle-end" pattern, which writers in any medium can learn to utilize as a starting point for achieving structural cohesion in their writing. Writers who attend to the architectural component of their writing anticipate, manipulate, and cater to their audience's expectations, enhancing the predictability and understandability of what they write.

The most common way that structural considerations are taught in writing classes is by encouraging students to write an outline of an essay before drafting it out, and this kind of outlining is certainly a useful tool for thinking about organizing ideas. But used in this way, outlines can also become lifeless lists of words that fail to authentically challenge students to grapple with the creative choices and meta-cognitive operations that are involved in rhetorical architecture. It is worth thinking "outside the outline" to imagine other ways of inviting students to think critically and imaginatively about how they organize their ideas.

- Integrate outlining into the writing process more thoroughly by asking students to draw up a rough outline for a possible paper before they have started researching it, a "research outline" that compiles and arranges detailed information about their writing topic, and a post-outline that evaluates the organization of their drafts.
- Brainstorm a taxonomy of typical architectural tropes that writers commonly use, such as beginning-middle-end, most general to most specific, most familiar to most unusual, least important to most important, three main points, problem-solution, pro/con/synthesis, etc., and invite students to think about how they could adapt the presentation of their ideas to reflect different structural models.
- Encourage students to reflect on what a potential reader would expect after they heard the topic of the piece of writing, after they heard the title, after they read the first sentence,

after they read the first paragraph, etc. Encourage students to think about how they can fulfil, thwart, or build on these expectations.

- Ask students to brainstorm "chapter titles" for paragraphs, before or after they write them, or to draw a graphic "map" of their essay as a sequence of rooms or habitats.
- Print out a student draft with one paragraph on each page, and then challenge classmates to reassemble the essay in the correct order (if they get it "wrong," the incorrect assemblage may be a more effective way of organizing the essay).

Context

A "good" piece of writing typically conveys the impression that it did not fall randomly out of a void. "Good" writing in any genre tends to carry within it a sense of the social, historical, and literary context out of which it arises and which gives it its meaning. In a research paper, the sense of context is conveyed through citations to the work of other researchers. In experimental poetry, it is conveyed through the manipulation of styles and conventions of other poets. In a technical manual, it comes across through adherence to the rhetorical formulas typical of other manuals of its kind. In academic culture, it is common to think of writing as a supremely individualistic act, but, in fact, an act of self-expression is always embedded in a human situation, and effective writers tend to acknowledge and work within this broader frame of reference. An emphasis on "disciplinary literacy" identifies writing as a process of "thinking within and about a discipline, involving textual conversations with previous scholars" (Johnson et al., 2005). Writing that demonstrates awareness of its discursive background allows both readers and writers to situate the author's point of view within a landscape of other perspectives, increasing the relevance of the writer's ideas and enhancing the impact of the writing itself.

In a class that focuses on research writing, students are typically encouraged to incorporate quotes and facts from other writer's work into their own, and this is an important strategy for developing a sense of discursive context, but this kind of "cherry-picking" can also oversimplify and marginalize the relationship between the student work and the work of other writers in the discipline. Assignments that grapple with the work of other writers in a more meaningful way can help to reinforce the sense that the student-writer is carrying on a conversation with a wider community and making a meaningful contribution to a discipline.

- Instruct students to locate another piece of writing that is as close as possible to the kind of writing they plan to do and to reflect on how they can learn from it and build on it.
- Encourage students to email writers who have written about the kinds of things that they are writing about and to ask questions, seek advice, or bounce ideas off of them.
- Provide students with examples of specific publications or websites that publish the kinds of writing they are doing, encourage them to tailor their writing to the style of that outlet, and motivate them to submit the finished product to the editors for publication.
- Assign a "public opinion" research project that requires students to canvas their classmates and the wider community regarding assumptions and preconceptions about their writing topic and then to use the responses as a starting point for their writing.
- Encourage students to use social media to receive feedback on their research question or thesis, specific phrases or ideas from their writing, or any other aspect of their writing project.

Enthusiasm

Writing that connects strongly with readers tends to do so at an emotional level. This does not mean that the style of a piece of writing is "highly emotional," breathless, or overwrought, but simply that the writer communicates a sense of conviction, a belief that what they have to say is important. Different genres of writing express conviction in different ways: poetry may use dramatic language, and persuasive writing may be passionate, but a conviction can also be expressed through scientific rigor, sober analysis, or intense focus. At its best, writing is motivated by human passion – passion for truth, passion for justice, or even passionate skepticism. "Good" writers are people who believe that what they have to say is so urgent that they are willing to endure the inconveniences and frustrations of the writing process to say it and to say it accurately and fully. As (Barry, 1997) explains, "When there is a high level of enthusiasm, purpose and challenge, many students will rise above any negative self-images they might have of themselves as writers" (p. 10). Moreover, writing that is authentically animated by the writer's enthusiasm will be more likely to connect with readers, even in the presence of imperfect grammar or underdeveloped architectural elements. These kinds of mechanical problems can always be edited away, but no piece of writing is worth revising if the writer is indifferent to what they're writing about. An absence of enthusiasm is a fatal flaw for a piece of writing.

It is pointless to try to teach students to simulate an illusion of enthusiasm in their writing; the much more worthwhile pursuit is to direct students to appreciate the role that passionate engagement plays in their writing and in their lives and to direct students toward writing topics that align with things that they are already enthusiastic about. At the same time, we can also model for students the spirit of approaching any intellectual task with enthusiasm. Activities that promote the value of enthusiasm can help students to develop a greater appreciation for the role that emotional engagement plays in learning and communication.

- Introduce writing assignments by asking students to reflect on how they can use the writing assignment to pursue topics that are of unique interest to them.
- Assign reflective writing projects that ask students to think about the kind of learning that they do "for fun," apart from academic or professional requirements, and to think about what attracts them to those subjects.
- Ask the student to flash-write a paragraph arguing that their writing topic is the most important topic in the world and see if they can convince themselves.
- Encourage students to think about the kind of impact that they want their writing to have and to think about any given writing project as an opportunity to make the world a better place.
- Encourage students to find other writers or public figures who communicate a sense of passion in their writing and discuss the ways these writers engage and influence their audiences.

Originality

Originality is arguably the most important and most elusive quality associated with "good" writing. Most people would agree that if a piece of writing does not communicate any original ideas, then there is no point in writing it. At the same time, while we might encourage our students to come up with "original" ideas, there are no widely practiced instructional methods for teaching them to

develop novel insights and to pioneer new lines of inquiry. Of course, most disciplines concern themselves with teaching students' conclusions that have already been arrived at by previous scholars, but a writing project is an opportunity for students to turn the tables on this dynamic by conceptualizing and articulating their own points of view. It is little surprise that many students freeze up since we often think of an "original idea" as something that comes out of the blue – a magical kind of otherworldly visitation that is impossible to purposely achieve. Many teachers, even teachers of writing, may feel that "originality" is something that has to come out of the students themselves, and of course, this is true by definition, but, in the same way, that a thoughtful writing curriculum can support students' ability to express themselves, explicit instruction in creative thinking can help them to identify and pursue their own original ideas.

The most important thing to keep in mind about teaching "originality" is that it is inherently easy to do, since every human being is inalienably original, characterized by a certain arrangement of thoughts, feelings, and ways of being that has never existed before and which will never exist again in the history of the universe. In their discussion of the advantages of blending creative writing and traditional composition pedagogies, (Berg & May, 2015) emphasize the principle that "creativity isn't selectively bestowed on some and not others" (p. 110). Instruction geared toward promoting originality begins with the premise that students can't help having original thoughts once they learn to look precisely at their own attitudes and impressions.

- Assign low-stakes responses to writing prompts that ask students to think about what sets them apart from other people, what they know that nobody else knows, and what they have to offer their fellow human beings.
- Brainstorm a list of absurd ideas that have never been expressed before, and then set small groups to the task of trying to prove these absurd ideas.
- Arrange "mash-up" thought experiments that take two random topics (computer science and experimental dance, the American Revolution and quantum physics, hip-hop and botany) and attempt to examine each one from the perspective of the other.
- Study surrealist art and poetry, encourage students to produce their own (the stranger the better), and devote class time to playing surrealist games (such as Beautiful Corpse).
- Identify passages in student writing that demonstrate originality and encourage students to free-write "into" those ideas.

Conclusion

Not all of these elements are equally important to every writing task, of course, and one of the advantages to explicitly identifying the rhetorical dimensions of effective writing is that doing so allows students and teachers to evaluate any given writing project in terms of how much importance it assigns to each of the five dimensions. We can chart these five rhetorical dimensions as a radial pentagon, as in Figure 1. Figure 2 shows how different genres of writing chart against this pentagonal grid. While more "subjective" styles of writing tend to skew to the left of this grid, placing a priority on the values of fluency, originality, and enthusiasm, more "objective" styles of writing skew to the right, with a chief emphasis on fluency and architecture. The research paper is an interesting example of a genre in which all of the rhetorical dimensions are highly valued—inviting students to discuss their own appraisal of how the expectations of different writing assignments chart across this radial grid provide opportunities for thinking about the features

associated with effective writing, as well as for aligning their own efforts with the expectations of both teachers and a wider potential readership.

Developing a clearer understanding of what goes into "good" writing is obviously a crucial step in both doing it and teaching it. While a process approach to writing instruction helps students to manage the many sub-tasks required by any writing project, a "product-oriented" approach can supplement this curriculum by focusing on the intellectual and psychological elements that characterize successful communication.

Figure 1
Rhetorical dimensions
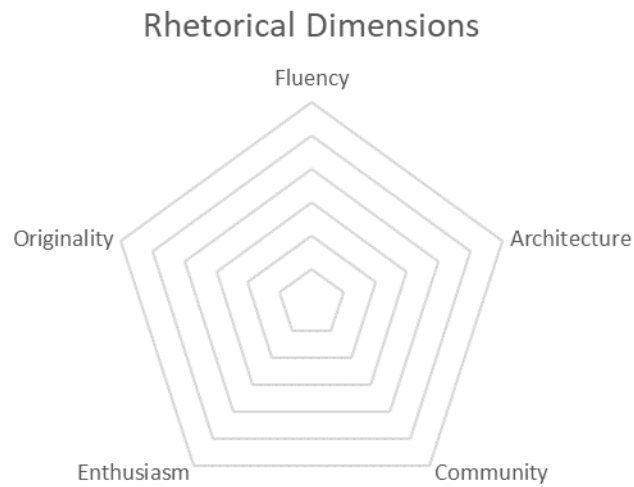
Figure 2
Writing genres charted against rhetorical dimensions
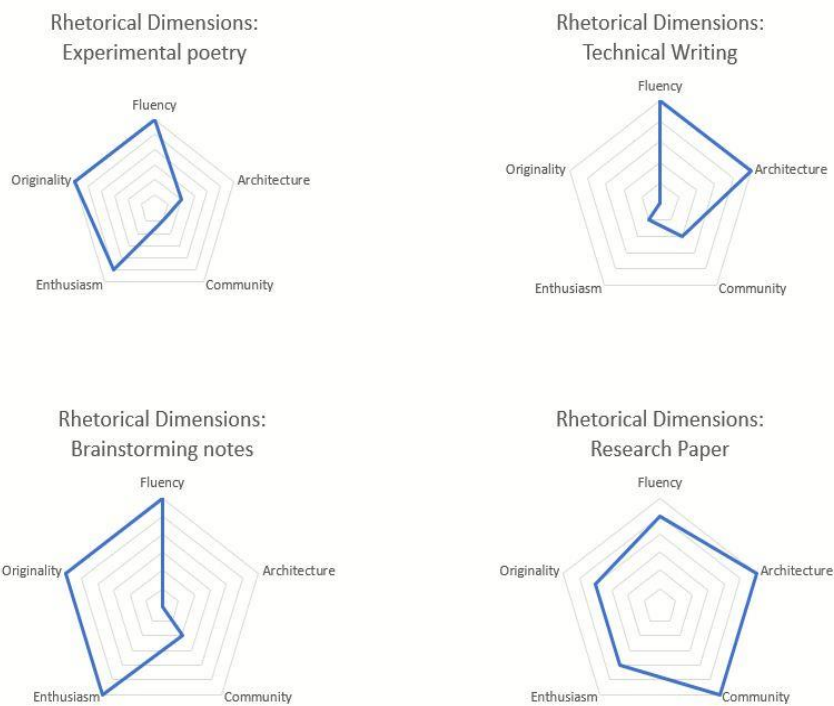
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