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Write from the Beginning

As professors, we love learning. It is something we enjoy doing, and we do it well. When we share our learning with colleagues, we explore anew much of what we have investigated, through writing, in professional journals, and conference papers. Slowly, over a long period of time, we acquired writing skills valued in our disciplines, not by listing precepts to be slavishly followed but by example: practicing our own craft as writers, building from examples to those precepts. We have observed how other writers we admire in our profession do their writing, and if we were lucky we may even have seen how these writers went about fashioning their writing—how they invent ideas, where they write, which technologies they use, and the like. In such situations, we learn much because it is always instructive to see how mentors produce writing rather than to speculate on their composing process when we have only final forms: essays, articles, books.

But do our students share in those same learning experiences? Are they euphoric with their writing in the disciplines, seizing writing as a way to discover, to ask deeper questions, to study through problems, to find out what they don't know? In my thirty years' experience as a writing teacher, and as much of the professional literature demonstrates, only a few students come to a general education class eager to write.

Nevertheless, how can we improve on their experiences? We may justly feel ambivalent adding value to their encounters with disciplinary writing: What kind of commitment will such a workload require of us? Does it mean more grading? What kind of assignment design will it demand? How can a writing assignment

be designed so it is enjoyable for students and us? At the same time, as lovers of learning we cannot help but be concerned with the weak writing we see pass our desks every day and the great gulf that spans our experiences with powerful writing and theirs.

On the other hand, can those experiences be much different from ours, especially their school experiences? My colleagues regularly observe that it is so easy to become buried in the busyness our professional life demands that inventing new and invigorating writing assignments is too burdensome. And the burden didn't just appear. When we entered the teaching profession we were thrust into writing committee reports, institutional assessments, and scholarly papers. Not long thereafter, we were probably asked to teach a course in our discipline that requires a good deal of writing. The pressure builds. The enormity of those competing tasks at hand can quickly diminish our joy in writing. If we step farther back, we can even see ourselves joined with our students in their experiences with writing. We can even feel like students in these circumstances when—if you're anything like me—your history with school-sponsored writing as a student has been mixed.

But perhaps you lack confidence about your own writing skills. You may feel like a decent writer, but teaching writing in your discipline seems daunting and even frightening. You may value writing in the classroom but ask, as one of my colleagues does, "Who am I to teach writing? I just don't feel qualified. And even if I did, I don't have time to teach a second subject."

If the difficulties seem insurmountable, the benefits of using writing in a content course seem miniscule. What can you expect if you bring a fuller-bodied writing into your classroom and into your professional life? Specifically, what can you anticipate, as a professor in a content course, from reading this book and participating in the approach I advocate both for your own and your students' writing? Very little, unless you covet a passion and energy for writing itself.

If you have that exuberance already, let me invite you into ways that can sustain or even increase that love for your own and your students' writing. If you lost that passion in the busyness of your professional life, let me help you recapture that first love. If you have never known that deep passion for writing—or know it only as an acquaintance—let's move together through this book to secure that closeness to writing in the same way you have for learning. In short, wherever you are in your journey with writing in your profession and in your pedagogy, this book is written for you.

How can I be so sure? Because like you, I share in the *Writing Problem*.

What Is the Writing Problem?

Even though I savor the times I reserve for writing and often find composing joyful, I haven't always enjoyed the pathways to writing that my elementary school teachers taught me to tread. Straightjacket outlines. "Correct" prose. "Think carefully before writing." Those high-stakes goals always eluded my grasp. Even now, I still have to untangle long arguments, work hard to synthesize a committee report so that the document sounds like it ascended into one voice, or pause over starting a single e-mail. But now these occasions are less frequent and more readily repairable. Part of that is because of greater experience. But experience doesn't explain everything. I like to walk to the college and have been for a good deal of my tenure there, but I don't think I'm a better walker to school than I was ten years ago. Something else entered into my stride.

With that greater experience—that is, the longer I teach and the more I write—I identify more closely with the struggles of many of my colleagues who do not find writing enthralling. Moreover, I have found another community that writes and grapples with the same writing difficulties: my students. Though we may vary in magnitude—whether we agonize or are blocked or

hesitate—we unite in the same dissonance: the need to produce effective writing yet the failure to attain it by willpower alone.

This puzzlement is what I call the Writing Problem, and it has four components.

1. *Through schooling, students conclude that good writing equals an absence of error, an inference they base on feedback from their previous experiences with school-sponsored writing.*

In *Vernacular Eloquence*, Peter Elbow observes that most students learn to read from hearing their parents or guardians—or someone who loves them—read to them regularly. They learn to write, however, within the sterile environment of school and from someone outside their family (Elbow, 2012). I would add that during those early encounters with writing in school students learn—and they learn it well—that their school-sponsored writing is incomplete without teachers marking up their papers. In such environments, students initiate writing only when they deem it is worth doing, when it is available as a receptacle for correction—marginal notes, special symbols, and terminal comments. Good writing, in such a view, occurs when something is absent: teacher corrections. But such absences are rare. One conscientious colleague I know carries mountains of student papers home every weekend to “correct.” As she reports, “I see so much bad writing. I feel guilty if I don’t mark everything I see.”

I discovered that uneasy status of school writing firsthand in fifth grade when I sponsored my own writing project, for which I reluctantly recruited my English teacher into my audience. Since my parents were not avid readers, she was the only adult reader I knew. My novel, *The Great Alaska Mystery*—the product of a full year of drafting on a Royal manual typewriter with persistently stuck keys and overinked o’s—was enthusiastically received by Mrs. Ruttenburg. After I tentatively offered my unsolicited book to her, she asked her colleague in the art department to construct a hard cover and bind the pages of my manuscript to make a

“proper book.” Every week or so I would ask Mrs. Ruttenburg if I could be excused to travel down the long hallway to the elusive art room to check on the status of the book binding. I could hear my heart beating heavily as I struggled to produce my question to The Artist. And then finally, after weeks of silence, there it was, mystically appearing on Mrs. Ruttenburg’s desk: a beautiful hand-bound volume, black stitching on the spine. The art teacher had drawn a green outline of Alaska with magic marker, along with parallel interior lines.

“Very art-like,” I thought, overjoyed. “A proper book.”

And it was beautiful. When I opened it, however, I immediately saw the splash of color: the teacher’s red pen branded its pages. The burning marks pointed to punctuation mistakes marked for dialogue, rules I didn’t even know that suddenly appeared and were quickly applied. The sweetness and bitterness I experienced was hard for a fifth grader to process. It’s still hard.

I struggle to this day with what the teacher actually taught me about my writing: perhaps that it’s not worthy of a book but let’s make it into a book anyway? My embarrassment at having made so many errors overshadowed my joy at having my loose pages bound as a book. The teacher told me later that my yearlong effort had inspired many in the classroom to write their own books.

“Jonathan started one today,” she beamed.

The other students never finished, however. And we never returned to the subject of writing in that classroom again. My writing produced no lasting, edible fruit. However, the red stains remained.

Is it any surprise, then, that our students come to us with a developed avoidance strategy concerning writing? Even some of the brightest students, such as the entering class from Stanford University, arrive as “pretty confident writers” but find that confidence “considerably shaken” after their first year when college exposes them to a broad range of assignments and genres (Haven, 2009).

Students communicate effectively every day in acts they don't think twice about initiating—sketching, painting, doodling, talking, blogging, messaging—without teachers assigning subjects or composing prompts, in and out of school. Unlike their school-sponsored writing, these acts are prolific, are part of their lives, and do not require a teacher-audience. This writing accomplishes something for them: it has legs and brings about some change, no matter how great. Students participate in all sorts of self-sponsored writing, even though they and their teachers may not acknowledge it as real writing.

What if we could harness that inventiveness for school-sponsored writing?

2. As a rule, school-sponsored writing equals high-stakes writing.

Teaching writing, especially in a content course, is difficult. Seldom are there pay rewards. There are workload incentives to avoid writing too, such as its heavy grading demands. Then there is the issue of training. I've heard some faculty declare quite openly, even among writing-across-the-curriculum (WAC) committee members, that they have no business teaching writing. They confess that they serve on writing committees and teach WAC courses because they feel administrative and departmental pressures to do so. They meet their professional obligations, but they can avoid the compartmentalized writing course when they can. Who can blame them?

Writing in school settings seems to invite resistance. Very early in my career, I remember discussing our students' collective hatred of writing with a colleague. I lamented how students confessed their horror stories of school-sponsored writing. Yet, one had really shocked me that day: A freshman reported that one of his teachers never returned his major research paper because, the teacher admitted at the end of the year, he had written "unkind messages on it" and crumbled the student's paper in anger. How could I possibly reach this student now with how writing could be

joyful? I told my colleague I was frustrated to teach those courses where writing was the cornerstone, a foundation students worked eagerly all semester to dislodge, no matter if the whole building would topple.

In that struggle, I told him, I was exhausted: “Why can’t I just teach a few English courses?” I laughed.

He laughed too, but for another reason. “I hate writing too,” he blurted out. “I do it, yes, because I have to as a scholar, but I certainly don’t like it very much.” And this confession came from a literature professor!

I think he overstated his case. I know many, many colleagues throughout our profession who enjoy writing. But my friend’s comment made me think of all the ways I avoid a particular kind of writing: where the stakes are high, the cost is great, and achieving success is rare. When I first started teaching, I concocted excuses for why I didn’t write. For example, I reasoned I couldn’t write in my office because it was too noisy; the library, on the other hand, was too quiet. How could I possibly work on a long project when I had no extended block of uncommitted time or on small ones since my days were fragmented? Of course, if I would get a topic, I promised myself, I would be in a position to write; however, I didn’t have an immediate subject, so any writing done now would be premature, even wasteful. After all, my first job to my students was as a teaching professor and the second as a writer who writes. This scaffolding served me many years.

I persisted in that view too because I knew I was not alone: I was in the company of a population who do not write readily and enthusiastically and by choice in school: our students.

Many faculty wrestle with writing in the same ways their students do. Yes, they write—as our students write—but are equally compelled to write for high stakes. For faculty, high-stakes writing means promotion, scholarship, and other professional gains—if they succeed. For students, essay examinations and research papers mean better grades and even better jobs—if they succeed.

Even for faculty who do write regularly and do it well, they still face, at times, internal resistance, a critic that voices doubts throughout their writing. It can stop them from finding meaning or starting from a blank sheet. It can occur anytime, too, unpredictably, and even when faculty writers want desperately to generate it.

As a result, both students and faculty have plentiful incentives to avoid it, procrastinate over it, and sometimes grow into a stance where they hate writing.

3. *The pressures inherent in high-stakes writing alone persuade faculty and students that low-stakes writing is not worthwhile.*

Students are incentivized to see only writing that's graded as worthwhile and, even then, only writing that supposedly records what is already mentally planned. Academic culture encourages professors to think that only work that has passed the grading of referees and editors in a disciplinary field is worthwhile. Thus, student and faculty writing communities face the same attitudes that high-stakes-only work affords—anxieties, impatience, fear, and even hatred of writing. In many ways, we are knotted together as one community in the Writing Problem.

In school environments, it is common to hear both faculty and students talk similarly about writing. Next time, listen for the parallels in the way both describe missed deadlines, whether it be student papers or scholarly journal submissions. How do they explain their unedited final drafts, whether research papers or dense faculty committee reports? Or perhaps you will hear both discuss the declension of their “underwritten” essays, whether it is students who pull all-nighters or faculty who compose just-in-time journal articles. Maybe you have caught yourself sounding like your students when freely discussing your own writing with trusted colleagues. I know I have.

At the same time, I hear very little discussion about low-stakes writing within school settings. In serving many years on a WAC

committee, I notice faculty have difficulty designing assignments in writing-intensive courses that are informal, or low stakes. Even then, there is the difficulty of how they fit into a high-stakes writing regiment where grading is the centerpiece. At the same time, I also have students wanting to show me the low-stakes writing they produce on their own—their fan fiction and blogs—but they lack their instructor's permission or the skills to bring that kind of writing into coursework. They are experimenting with low-stakes writing on their own.

How much better our pedagogy would be if we could transition students—and our own writing—from low-stakes to high-stakes writing.

4. *For both faculty and students, writing often occupies an uneasy second-subject position in the content classroom.*

Today, there are many associated communities trying to mimic WAC successes, such as initiatives for diversity and information and computational competencies. Yet the proliferation of these other skills and competencies prods WAC to move beyond labeling courses as *writing intensive* into more integrative roles, as some have argued (White, 1990).

I recall one faculty member in the sciences who confessed he “had to teach writing because the writing in his classes is so bad” but who nevertheless questioned how specific techniques could fit into a comprehensive whole. New and junior faculty typically have to teach the assigned WAC course. In some universities, new hires must teach freshman writing courses within the discipline of their fields. It is easy, though unfortunate, to conclude that teaching writing means teaching a second subject, one that competes with the primary focus. One chemistry professor once complained to me in a faculty writing seminar that he had so much material to cover that he didn't have time to teach writing. I find similarly busy professors in all disciplines conflicted over their responsibilities to teach what they refer to as two subjects.

Within writing-across-the-curriculum and writing-in-the-disciplines programs at various liberal arts and general education colleges, writing morphs into an appendix to regular catalog courses. It can become distracting to have committees and commissions to promote writing, like designating W-courses, which in turn becomes a code for additional workload for both faculty and students. That those same courses are often taught without a writing emphasis reinforces a stereotype: that writing is a supplemental, secondary subject, complete with an extra chapter of assignments. It is common to hear students complain that the PSYCH 350 offering this semester is a W-course that requires an “extra” research paper.

What we need, instead, is an approach to teaching course content through writing, a manner that both honors the fullness of writing and makes it likable. That conclusion I faced in my own bumpy ride back to writing.

My Journey Back to Writing

I have a long life history with the Writing Problem. When I look back on my experiences with school literacy, I never recall seeing my teachers write. I thought keeping writing private was connected to the job of the professional, something writers were expected to do. Only amateurs like my fellow students should expose their unfinished works to the teacher and others in peer groups. To me, it was an unfathomable mystery of how writers produced writing, let alone good writing, since I had never seen it performed live.

Even in college, I wondered if instructors started out as badly as I did and, through rewriting, persevered to the good. Certainly when I heard writing talked about in the classroom, I never saw my teachers performing it for us. The closest I came was an instructor who demonstrated freewriting on the board, but it wasn't real writing, in my mind, and he never repeated the exercise again and never expected us to imitate it.

When I began teaching, I didn't change perspectives since I saw that most of my professors assigned to teach writing in their content

courses or who felt professionally obliged to include writing nevertheless expended much effort to avoid it. I felt their pressures too, those that began with despising the assigning, reading, and grading required for writing courses. Then there was the time commitment! In effect, I came to see that I was teaching my students what I could not achieve. I had become, in essence, a nonwriting writing teacher. Over time, I felt quite comfortable dispensing pious advice that none, including myself, could follow.

I came to this conclusion when I finished a graduate degree in rhetoric and began teaching freshman writing courses full time. When I taught those same courses as a graduate instructor, I was writing research and reaction papers for graduate classes, so I was doing writing. At my first job, however, I didn't have even those extrinsic assignments. I reasoned I could wait on writing new journal articles and the like since I had a backlog of pieces gathered from those school-sponsored assignments, ones I could easily send out for publication later. Besides, I reasoned, I was now at a teaching institution where scholarship was nice but not required. My writing abruptly ceased.

When I spoke before those initial college classes, I didn't recognize my voice; I sounded like a teacher and not like a writer or even a teacher of writers. I came to studying a skill that I myself had ceased to practice. In my pedagogy, I found myself substituting other things, like heuristics and composing diagrams and theories of writing, but whatever space they occupied in the classroom, they always came at the expense of my daily practice and outside of a community I was supposed to be creating with my student writers.

I began identifying with my wife's book bag, its slogan lamenting writer's block and procrastination: "I sat down today to write, but my coffee was cold so I went to warm it up, and when I got to the kitchen ..." and it goes on like that, within one meandering, branching sentence, until it ends with "but after 45 minutes I insisted I had to get back to writing, so I hung up, grabbed my mug, and went to my desk, but my coffee was cold so ..." My wife remarked, "Isn't it so true? I bought the bag at a writing conference."

To gain perspective on that dilemma, I looked back. I remembered seeing myself as a writer—just a person who writes—hunched in a rowdy elementary school grade classroom. I remembered writing about every school subject that interested me, and the writing drove that interest in history, geography, and science. It was hard to determine what came first: interest in the content or the writing. My writing became so regular that the study hall proctor, the vice principal of the school, asked me just as regularly, “Do you have a story for me today?” It was the only occasion from early school-sponsored writing where I felt the teacher had read my work.

Years later, I saw the same kind of punishment as an undergraduate when teachers assigned research papers to any student who earned less than an A on the midterm. Students earning A’s were rewarded with a reprieve from writing. Writing became the punishment for feeble performance, writing that probably was never read and certainly never welcomed. Incidents like these convinced me that if any force could squelch the powerful urge to write, school-sponsored writing was the best candidate.

What This Book Will Do For You

I offer this book to you, the teaching professor, as an approach to working through the Writing Problem in your courses and in your own writing. This method empowers you as colleagues, no matter your inclination to teach writing, to use the epistemic power of writing to serve your courses. You can accomplish this role for writing because this book seizes the potent forces already established in your own courses and in your own writing, building a structure that complements rather than compromises what you already find working. In short, this book gives you a method that equips you to use writing in the classroom and on your writing desk.

Allow me to nudge you, gently, in ways that gather the kindling to ignite that passion for writing.

That nudge is my way of writing this book for you, a wide range of teaching professors who value writing and want to carry the content of their course *without* carrying burdensome workloads such concerns often demand. In other words, I want this book to serve as a resource for using the power of writing to enable a deeper reflective experience in students by opening them to use writing for their learning in your course. Giving writing a centerpiece in your course accrues another benefit: it adds to your writing craft. As such, this book is not an English professor's book. Instead, it offers choices to combine your passion for your discipline, the students enrolled in your courses, and your own writing.

In short, I want this book to work for you. To me, this means that a series of isolated canned techniques won't suffice. We all need catalysts to help us think more constructively about writing for learning in our courses and in our scholarly work. I seek to give you an approach that guides and recommends without prescriptions. Sometimes in this book I launch into what I've learned through my own trial and error; other times I give examples of how you might carry out a recommendation. Please realize that no matter what arrangement I choose I don't have it all figured out; I am always learning new things from my writerly colleagues—professors and students. My advice is, "Here's what I do; here's what you can do."

As a result, I never ask or expect you, as the content specialist, to teach writing as a second subject. So many professors tell me they prefer specialists like the English department to teach writing. I'm sympathetic to their viewpoint. Similarly, I don't tell you how to teach your own discipline in the classroom; your training and expertise is something I take for granted here. Consequently, the toolbox I open in this book is for you to rummage through, the content specialist.

Instead of teaching writing, I am asking for a different kind of commitment. For our purposes, I want you to think of writing not as a subject or discipline right now but as a powerful way to encourage writing in your students and in your professional life. This working

perspective on writing, after all, is everybody's affair. It can enrich your teaching as it feeds your own writing. Those twin benefits can make writing truly enjoyable.

Thus, the overruling principle in this book is more of a reminder than an argument. You already believe this premise: Teaching helps students achieve continuous improvements, and in that way teaching can be just like writing. The Writing Problem is shared by all of us, including our students, no matter the degree. To lessen its severity, we need partnerships—learning to writing, professor to student, writer to writer. We are forever learning to teach, and we are forever learning to write. The powerful urge to learn is never discouraging in teaching; neither should it be with our own or our students' writing.

Structure of the Book

I organized this book as the walkthrough for a content course that privileges writing as a way of learning. The book doubles as a preparation for your own writing. The space writing occupies in this approach does not replace but rather facilitates your pedagogy and your professional writing life.

Chapter 2, "Plan with the Syllabus," grows out of the low-stakes exercise I ask you to start at the end of the present chapter and builds a conversation about writing practice in your pedagogy. Since the syllabus is the first exposure students have to your writing, it gives them insight into what you write as well as how you write.

Chapter 3, "Open That First Class with Writing," shows you how to acquire writing from students on the very first day and to make that low-stakes practice a satisfying exercise.

Chapter 4, "Write Daily: Practice Before Polish," pulls students away from extrinsic motivators like grades and demotivators like past writing experiences. Instead, this chapter emphasizes how to practice, something students don't know how to do. It is also something from which all writers can benefit.

Chapter 5, “Make Long Assignments Manageable for Everyone,” argues that you can segment lengthy assignments so students can work on discrete, specific tasks comfortably. This process can work for your own writing.

Chapter 6, “Prepare for Rewriting,” distinguishes between rewriting and the more involved revising. You and your students can initiate rewriting at any time, without lengthy training and explanations, familiarizing students with choosing the better among their generated options.

Chapter 7, “Offer Feedback for Classwork,” explains how to give student writers the kind of formative feedback that does not overextend your workload.

Chapter 8, “Give Feedback During Short Conferences,” shows how to make writing conferences manageable or how, in very large classes ways, to do the next best thing.

Chapter 9, “The Finals: Portfolio and Conference,” develops the final, summative assessment as a culmination to all the low-stakes practice students perform earlier in the course.

Chapter 10, “Offer But Two Cheers for Grading Writing,” explains how to use Peter Elbow’s conclusions about contract grading to define student performance so that you can concentrate on weightier matters like the writing itself. In such an approach, you delay grading so that students focus on their writing craft. It also frees you to assess your writing quickly, forming your low-stakes practice.

The appendix stimulates writing in the classroom with some exercises that work in conjunction with your content course.

A Way Forward

Some time ago, a student told me that I think all problems can be resolved by writing. I had to think about that for a moment. “Yes, that pretty much sums it up,” I said. “If writing is the problem, then writing must be the solution.”

Just now, my son Will spied over my shoulder at this section while I was composing it in our kitchen. “It sounds really professional,” he said.

I frowned. “Really?” I said. “I don’t want it to sound that way. I want it to sound like how my readers talk because I relate so closely to what they’re experiencing.”

“That’s good,” my fourteen-year-old replied. “But they want to know how you do it; they don’t want just someone to relate. Look, if they’re going to pick up this book, they want to start working right away. They want to know how to carry it out.”

Okay. So let the writing son teach the writing father. Let’s take notice again of how we just got started. Let’s not allow another moment to go by without bringing writing not only to how we research but also to how we teach in our discipline. This time let me be your writing fellow, your colleague, as we return now—you and me—as students of writing.

An Exercise to Get Us Started

Marilyn Roberts identifies the syllabus as a “document in process instead of a finished text to be ‘put to bed’” (2013, 109). If we also can think of our pedagogy as a continuing process of making classroom observations, we can also see syllabus writing as a great exercise for low-stakes practice that gets us thinking about using writing in the classroom.

But where can you start? One way I’ve found productive, and I think you will too, is to think about what you want to accomplish. But first, consider making a *brain dump*. What I’m recommending is time to get the messy and disconnected thoughts you have for the syllabus all in one space so you see what you’re thinking. In this context, writing captures and creates thinking all in one place.

Here’s something I do, and you can do it, too: I just openly freewrite about the present syllabus I have for a course I’ve taught, am teaching, or am planning to teach. Freewriting is the spontaneous, active transfer of your brain to your pen, writing not as fast as you can but as nonstop as you can. When you freewrite, you

push ever onward without hesitating or going back or crossing out or editing in any way. There's no recursive movement backward, only forward—figuratively and mentally. You want contact not with your internal critic but with your subconscious mind, which has been doing its own unrecorded writing. In freewriting, you push to the next word, the next line, the next page. Peter Elbow (1998) formalized this technique first in *Writing Without Teachers*, but it has many practitioners.

You can start with generating a focused freewrite of your syllabus. Start with a list or an instructive line like, "One thing I want to change about my syllabus is . . .," which you complete and go on from there. Don't worry about grammar or spelling or striking out text right now; don't concern yourself with staying on topic. If you can't think of what to write, transcribe, "I can't think of what to write." You'll soon tire of that mantra and circle back to writing about your syllabus. Just keep the writing moving—no retracing. We want not a seesaw but a bullet train through problems, difficulties, triumphs; whatever occupies your hand about your syllabus will engage your mind. Limit yourself to ten minutes.

Then let it settle, incubating until we address it in Chapter 2.

The Freewriting Habit and Quality

Without exception, every aspect of the Writing Problem for both faculty and students can have the same writerly solution, even if that solution, at first glance, looks counterintuitive or simplistic. This principle guides the book, starting with the sample exercise from the last section. It seems obvious but it's worth stating: we need to start somewhere.

We know it's often difficult for students to get started with writing a paper. The solution is to start writing anywhere, whether it's the germ of an idea or a search for meaning. We can call those first words a beginning. In a classroom situation, you can ask students to write prolifically and without stopping or other constraints for ten minutes—freewriting, for example—after first announcing a major assignment in class. Thus, as simplistic as it sounds the answer for

nonwriting is writing. Later in this book, I provide sample focused freewriting examples that you can adapt to your classroom and which can envelope your present high-stakes assignments.

When I presented this example in a writing seminar, one professor vehemently objected. “How does freewriting help them?” he asked, exasperated. “They are already bad writers. Freewriting is nothing more than more bad writing.”

However, we know that these so-called bad writers do not freewrite. Rather, they begin by fitting leaden prose into the structured, high-stakes genres assigned in class that do not tolerate bad writing. These bad writers need that freewriting beginning; they first need a place to dump their bad writing, a sanctioned space to overcome inertia to achieve something more (so-called good writing). If students can learn to freewrite habitually, they find the bad prose they produce becomes repetitive and boring; exhausted, they collapse, often unconsciously, into bursts of occasional and unplanned good writing. We occasionally witness this phenomenon when some students grind out a long paper at the last minute and a small insight appears, bookended by the bad writing. Unfortunately, student writers seldom see such and rewrite to shape that insight into a better paper.

There are also other considerations associated with bad writing. Those bad writers did not develop overnight; they entered into a process that led to ineffective writing. Some had very little writing instruction in school; others had very little experience with school-sponsored writing, and what they did have was largely negative. Many are just indifferent to writing and see it as something they *have* to do. No matter their past experiences, however, students can become better, even competent, writers, but it involves teaching some new habits. One of those, freewriting, enables us to start the journey.

It is precisely because so many of us start out as bad writers—professors and students—that we need to rehearse our language in a private forum to open up our thinking in prose. We need other habits, too, like becoming good rewriters. It takes time

and practice to accomplish a good end product. Consequently, anyone's judgments about *good* and *bad* at this initial point—including the writer's!—are premature. That so many students exhibit bad writing behooves us as professors to lengthen their writing process so that the writing can have time to develop. Acknowledging some of our own quick writing as bad, we can appreciate why we need to lengthen the writing process so we can generate a better product. In fact, when we characterize any academic writing as bad, we can just as accurately call it premature or unfinished.

In other words, students need a better process that extends their practice from the initial private domain—the bad—before going public with a better product. It is the professor who can best guide that practice. It starts with little structure and mushrooms to greater structure. Out of that greater structure, content can flourish. Consequently, there is never a shortage of content or structure—only time. Moreover, the relationship between content and structure is tight: distinguishable but inseparable. If we judge writing prematurely or divide the grade between structure and content—that is, before writers ripen their content and structure—we cut the vine before it blossoms.

Writers begin with a structure, the schema they import from their reading histories, their reading in a discipline, the way you have shaped the course. But they often cannot delve deeply into that structure yet. Freewriting is the bridge from their initial *unstructure* to the final structured product that we want them to achieve.

So yes, bad writers do need freewriting to transition content into a given structure. That means many rehearsals in an extended writing process so they have time to wed content to structure, something readers demand.

What About You?

Now look at your own writing habits. Have you tried freewriting? Have you worked the pen to open up your mind to new ideas that writing can introduce? Have you put aside thoughts of bad writing so that you can push, later, toward the good?

The way to lessen the Writing Problem is to start writing, and the easiest and most prolific way is to start today with freewriting. Find a comfortable pen, devote a new notebook exclusively to writing (called a daybook), and take ten minutes to write continuously, without stopping. Follow this delightful invitation before attempting any structured writing project and just before any class starts. Try that freewriting out by longhand, too—choose *analog*—so your optimal technology is the minimal: a nucleus of pens. The coordination of eye, brain, and hand presents an earthy physicality that births writing. As you freewrite, you build a fluency and experience with language, experimentation without evaluation. Freewriting also encourages rewriting when you read it to yourself and then to others, a rewriting that you engineer before others even hear.

In summary, when you next begin a writing project, by either assigning it to students or executing your own, start by writing about it. Freewriting is one useful strategy to get started. As helpful as thinking about the project or talking about it with a colleague might be, recognize that these activities are not writing. The best writing you can do is when you start early, allowing the writing to invent your ideas and to inform your conversations with a colleague. When this way becomes a habit, you will not only produce more writing and with greater facility but will also ease it into structured, formal writing. Suddenly ideas will bud. A structure will emerge in your mind much more easily when the content is carried in your writing. The messy, “bad” writing in your own notebook gives birth, given time and permission, to the more structured enterprises that follow.

Then encourage students to follow your lead by inviting them to write without stopping for a few minutes at the start of any writing enterprise, whether class meeting or project. It becomes both of you then to write from the beginning.