

Creating Effective Writing Prompts

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Guiding Principles and Procedures for Prompt Writing

Purpose

Always determine the purpose for selecting an on-demand writing situation by asking the following questions:

1. Why am I doing this, and what do I hope to accomplish?
2. What will I *do* with the results?
3. What prior experiences have students had to prepare them for this experience?

Discourse Categories

Decide on a desired discourse category:

Expressive Texts are Author-Oriented: The goal (aim) is to make the reader understand more about the writer. The primary purpose is to construct meaning of the event(s) for the writer, to clarify the significance of the event(s), and/or to express how it made (or makes) the writer feel.

Informative Texts are Subject-Oriented: The goal (aim) is to make the reader understand the subject. The primary purpose is to tell about the event or to convey meaning about the details so that the audience understands the message.

Persuasive Texts are Audience-Oriented: The goal (aim) is to influence the audience/reader. The primary purpose is to convince the reader about a particular issue/perspective.

Literary Texts are for Entertainment: Although DSTP does not assess the literary purpose, teachers are encouraged to allow students opportunities to write for the literary purpose.

Writing the Prompt

Determining the prompt specifications (sometimes called Scaffolding or Rhetorical Surround): If we are to provide the students with writing opportunities that respond to a “variety of purposes and audiences,” then we must be sure to vary the rhetorical specifications.

S. O. A. P. Acronym

Subject – information regarding who or what the piece is about

Occasion – the writing situation

Audience – the intended audience

Purpose – to express, to inform, to persuade



Other rhetorical considerations

The writer's role (student, parent, consumer, etc.)

The form (letter, paragraph, poem, essay)

Warning: It is **most important** to strike a balance between too open ended and too structured. The appropriate amount of information will allow for a range of responses. The "rhetorical surround" provided should always challenge the best students but also allow less-skilled writers to respond to the topic in some way.

Composing the Prompt: Best advice—Try to keep prompts to two or three sentences.

Sentence 1 is a declarative sentence—(simple whenever possible) which makes a generalization about a particular subject. Sentence 2 is a sentence (again, try to make it a simple sentence—oftentimes an interrogative one) which might lead the students to make a personal response to the subject identified in the first sentence. The last statement is always the actual prompt, or directive, that instructs the student about his or her specific task. Oftentimes, the final sentence is separated from the previous sentences by a blank line.

Kinds of Writing Prompts

1). Stand Alone Prompts: Although it's not common classroom practice, large-scale assessments (such as DSTP) require students to respond to prompts that do not have any particular relevance to classroom activities. The following is an example from DSTP:

Assume that you have just witnessed an important event in history such as the landing of astronauts on the moon, the invention of the wheel, the explosion of the Challenger, the assassination of Dr. Martin Luther King Jr., or another historical event.

Write a letter to a friend telling them about the event just as you saw it happen.

2). Response to Literature Prompts: Oftentimes we use literature as a springboard for writing occasions, asking students to "extend meaning" by connecting themselves to the literature they read.

In Charlotte's Web, Wilbur comes to accept Charlotte's death by caring for her babies. How have you or how has someone you know coped with a loss?

Write a letter to a friend explaining how you or a friend dealt with the loss of something or someone special.

***Note:** always be wary of prompts that invite highly emotional responses. Knowing the children in your classroom, you can decide when to avoid sensitive issues such as death or loss. This prompt would never be used for large-scale assessment but is offered here as an example of a prompt that could be tied to literature. Note also the addition of the caveat "or someone you know." This phrase allows students to write about something



other than their own lives (some parents do not like their children being asked to “divulge” information about their personal lives).

Notice that the previous prompts are informative (they ask the writer to “explain” something). The above prompt could easily be expressive if you rewrote the prompt as follows:

Everyone at some time suffers the loss of some specially valued person or thing. Tell how you or someone you know felt such a loss.

Write a letter to a friend expressing your feelings about the loss of something or someone special.

The point is that you want the prompt to be clear about the purpose of the writing.

Think about a club, sport, or activity that you’ve enjoyed participating in. What would you say to persuade other students to join your club?

Write a letter to your school newspaper urging students to participate in the club, sport, or activity that you believe would be enjoyable for them.

With TBW’s it is important to make sure students use information from the reading to respond to the prompt.

After reading the article “The Mess We’re In” [a fifth grade test passage about recycling], write the text for a speech convincing your classmates to reduce, recycle, and reuse. Use information from the article to convince your audience.

Note: TBW’s don’t always conform to prompt-writing protocols. Nevertheless, they are scored according to the standard writing rubric in addition to being scored for reading comprehension.

Word Choice: In order to encourage effective writing, prompts use purpose-specific verbs to elicit desired response:

1. explain	8. persuade
2. summarize	9. evaluate
3. define	10. tell about
4. defend	11. express
5. argue	12. describe
6. refute	13. illustrate
7. analyze	



“Think About’s” or Bullet Items: After composing the prompt, teachers often write a series of reminders which can be phrased as questions or simply bullet points:

As you write, be sure you remember to:

- state what club, sport, or activity you have enjoyed
- include enough convincing details so they will want to join
- present your ideas clearly and logically
- use correct and well-constructed sentences
- correct any errors in spelling, punctuation, capitalization

OR

Answering the following questions can help you plan your writing:

- What one club, sport, or activity do you most enjoy?
- What details will help you convince your reader to join that club, sport, or activity?
- What order will best present your details logically and clearly?
- Have you checked your sentences for clarity?
- Have you corrected any errors in spelling, punctuation, capitalization, etc.?

Equity/Fairness Issues

A. Well-written prompts:

1. do not demand specialized knowledge
2. do not presume experience that may have been denied some students for social, cultural, or economic reasons
3. do not ask students to comment on personal values, religious beliefs, self-esteem, or similarly sensitive or controversial issues
4. do not encourage diatribes against persons at school, parents, or local citizens
5. do not pose hypothetical situations that encourage the conditional and subjunctive mode

Well-written prompts:

1. prefer specific and immediate situations to abstract, theoretical ones
2. are potentially interesting to students
3. are potentially interesting to evaluators
4. deal with topics within the realm of students’ experiences

Classroom Prewriting Activities

For on-demand writing situations, it is best to allow students to have access to *all* the prewriting activities that you normally allow as part of your *Writer’s Workshop* *except* teacher conferences.



- A. **Best Writing: Decoding the Prompt**—Teach students strategies for “decoding prompts.” Make sure they know how to determine what the rhetorical specifications are (i.e., S. O. A. P.). Teach them how they might incorporate the prompt into a lead, show them how they can use “think about’s” as they organize their response, etc.
- B. **Brainstorming**—Certainly, students should be allowed to brainstorm ideas. Teachers may write a list of these topics on the board. *Caution:* When adults “suggest” a topic, literal-minded students think it is the “right” answer and will often attempt to write about a subject about which they know nothing. The teacher’s role is to facilitate—ask probing questions, but do not “suggest” possible topics, and be careful not to privilege some topics over others unless you know it’s one that will work.
- C. **Conferring With Peers**—Allow kids to share ideas with a partner whenever possible (for true on-demand situations, this may not be possible, and peer content review and editing are definitely not a part of the on-demand scenario).
- D. **Graphic Organizers**—Provide a graphic organizer to help kids get started. However, it is *important* for kids to understand that they may use *any* prewriting technique or organizer that works for them! If your students normally use a “web” or a Venn diagram, keep poster-sized versions on display, and model their use regularly so that when assessment time comes, kids know how to use these strategies independently and to their fullest advantage.
- E. **Rough Drafts**—Make sure students understand the value of a rough draft, and make sure they know they will be turning in a final, “good” copy as well.

Instructional Implications

Writing assessments should *influence* instruction rather than merely *reflect* it. Yet on-demand writing inhibits much of what we encourage in our writing instruction. But there are ways we can work around the problem.

Before the assessment: Teach students to *decode* the prompt.

S. O. A. P. – if students practice using this acronym as both writers and as critical readers, they will become proficient with it.

Do-It-Yourself Rubrics – take the state writing rubric and have students define the qualities of a “4” by making explicit statements about how those qualities will “look” in any particular assignment.



After the Assessment: Create instructional activities based on actual student writing.

Accountability:

Once the “practice assessment” is over, papers have been scored, and instructional activities based on the writing have been completed, allow students to revise their papers “for grade.”

Base student grades on progress. In other words, if a student receives a “2” on his first practice assignment piece but earns a “3” on his next piece, base that student’s grade on the progress he or she made.



Prompt Template

Subject: _____

Occasion: _____

Audience: _____

Purpose: _____

Other relevant considerations (i.e., writer's role and/or form, if appropriate):

Prompt Sentence 1: _____

Prompt Sentence 2 (and 3 if needed): _____

Directive: _____

Bullet "Think About's" or Questions

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Qualities of "Fourness"—Describe, using the rubric categories, what a "4" paper would look like: _____

