

BLOGGING, OR HOW MY STUDENTS AND I RETURNED THE JOY TO OUR WRITING

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Abstract

In this practitioner piece, the author addresses the negative student attitudes towards writing. She offers blogging assignments as a solution for addressing student perceptions of writing as a burden. In addition to the Prompts Blog and the 20%-Time Blog, the author shares a video blog trailer assignment and a student self-reflection letter. Example assignments are included in the appendix.

Keywords

blogging, student attitudes towards writing, composition, video trailers

As I prepare for a new semester, I reflect on comments from previous students about their attitudes towards writing. Several students expressed sentiments like one particular developmental writing student's comment: "I've never been a fan [of] writing." Another developmental writing student shared, "I've always had a complicated relationship with writing; on one hand it is a great way for me to express myself, however on the other hand it can be extremely hard to do sometimes." To be fair, several students wrote they loved writing and had developed a positive attitude towards writing in high school or on their own. Unfortunately, many students, especially those who are under-prepared, arrive at the community college disliking writing.

First-year college writers and developmental writers alike frequently bring this distaste for writing with them when they enter our classrooms. Often first-year courses only reinforce negative beliefs about writing that students have developed. To be fair, high school and college teachers must require students to write in genres that prepare students for the academy and the workplace. As one of my students put it, "Writing classes when I was younger was a painful and unpleasant experience for me. They wanted you to follow a lot of guidelines to do so and I enjoy more of creative writing. I do not do well with a huge set of guidelines because it usually causes me to have a bad case of writers block." So, for this student the guidelines are the problem, but as teachers we know that the guidelines for academic and workplace writing are required.

Much has been written about the genres taught in first-year college classes, and many scholars stress teaching authentic genres. In her essay about “Mutt Genres,” Elizabeth Wardle (2009) reminds us “teachers are charged with preparing students to write for and in the activity systems of other disciplines. In essence, they are asked to teach students about and prepare them for the genres of other disciplines” (p. 767). This sentiment is echoed in NCTE’s position statement on “Professional Knowledge for the Teaching of Writing” (2016): “Since writers outside school have

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many different purposes beyond demonstrating accountability and they use more diverse genres of writing, it is important that students have experiences within school that teach them how writing differs with purpose, audience, and other elements of the situation.” However, even authentic genres come with the “guidelines” that created writer’s block for my student. In this article, I do not advocate changing the primary ways writing is taught in high school and college. Instead, I’d like to share the success I’ve had using various types of blog assignments as additional writing activities to flip the conversation

about student writing as “something that must be fixed” into writing as a joyful practice.

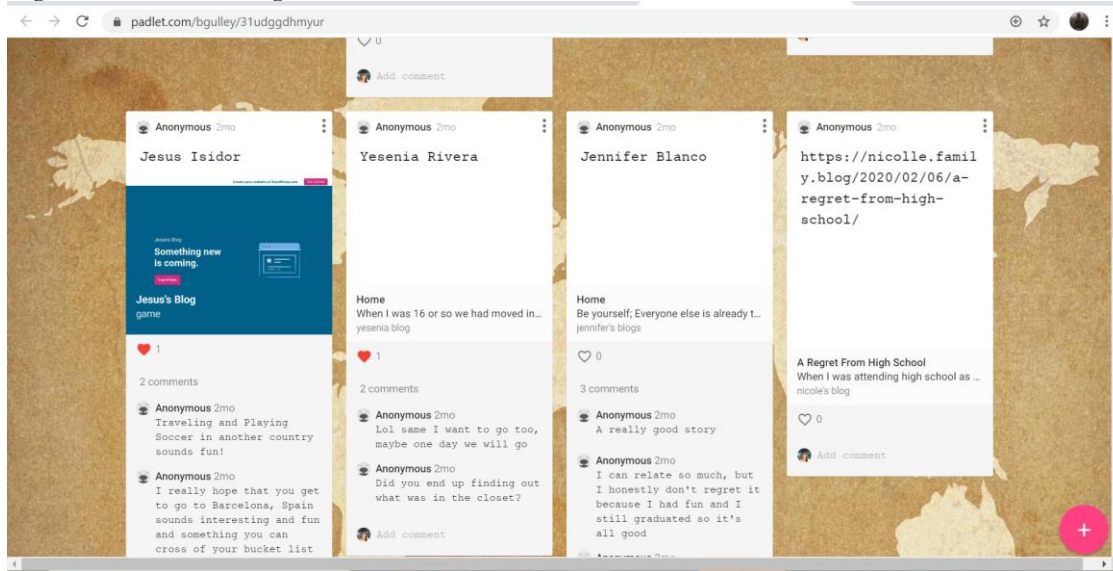
The Writing Prompt Blog

So often in developmental writing class, I find myself adding in commas or harping on missing topic sentences. Students frequently focus on mundane concerns rather than the message, too. However, when we start writing and reading Prompt Blogs, we laugh and cry together. We begin to understand each other as people. One semester, the entire class rallied around a student with autism who shared his blog post about the trouble he has communicating. Another student had us in stitches with a story about losing his pants while fishing. Sometimes I offer students time to blog during class, and I join in. I remember I am a writer, too. I share a bit of my authentic self with my students when they read about the time I jumped out of a moving bus or about the longest I went without sleeping.

The Prompts Blog assignment works well with any level writer. I use it with my developmental writing classes, and I enjoy writing to the prompts too. At the beginning of the semester, I give my students a list of 76 blog prompts that range from imaginative (describe the secret life of a school bus driver) to the reflective (what is the best writing advice you have ever received). The prompts were compiled by Elizabeth Baldrige (2014) and shared through the Conference of Basic Writing listserv (E. Baldrige, personal communication, July 22, 2014). Appendix A contains an abbreviated list of the prompts.

During the semester, students write on eight topics of their choice. Each blog entry is supposed to be 500 words. They write on a WordPress blog, and they share their blog URLs on a Padlet linked in our Canvas course shell (Canvas is the learning management system at my college). This could also be done with a shared Google document, too. WordPress is a free blogging platform that is easily available on the web (www.wordpress.com). I chose it because it was easy to use when I started this project. In recent years, the website has changed and now asks students to purchase a subscription. In the future, I plan to use Blogger (www.blogger.com) in my quest for user-friendly platforms. For my purposes, I want students to write on a public site that they can continue to use when our class is over. Padlet is another digital platform that is user-friendly, but it too wants students to buy a subscription (www.padlet.com). After creating their blogs, students access them through Canvas. Figure 1 is an example of students’ blogs posted on a Padlet.

Figure 1: Student Blogs on a Padlet



Note. Each box represents the student's blog URL. Beneath each blog, we see other students' comments.

About three times during the semester, I ask students to read through their classmates' blogs and comment on several that they enjoyed reading. Later, I turn this into a group assignment where the groups come to a consensus on their three favorite blog posts. Then we have a class discussion about what makes those specific blogs good writing and we invite our favorite bloggers to read their posts to the whole class.

Finally, at the end of the semester, students choose their three best blog posts to revise. We examine various definitions of good writing like excerpts from George Orwell's "Politics and the English Language" and Andrew Stanton's 2014 TED talk "The Clues to a Great Story." Then students write a cover letter for their blogs in which they define good writing using sources and illustrate how their blog posts are good writing using the same criteria. The assignment sheet for the final exam appears in Appendix B.

At their final exam, students turn in their blogs and cover letter. Then they read one blog post to the class. I encourage them to consider what they know about the class as an audience and try to connect with them. The audience members laugh or cry where it is appropriate, and they clap enthusiastically. The students get to experience their writing as a finished product that is meant for an audience's enjoyment. Isn't that why most professional writers write—to say something meaningful to a receptive audience? The Prompts Blog allows students to feel heard.

The 20%-Time Blog

Increasingly, as students leave our classrooms, they may be called upon to show future employers or educational programs evidence of their ability to write for the Web. In response to this, I ask my Composition I students to keep a WordPress blog on a single topic and post to it fifteen times during the semester. The topic should be one they have genuine interest in, and it must either have an informative or persuasive aim. I call it the 20%-Time Blog because it is modeled after the 20% of work time many companies give their employees to pursue their own interests. This has been well documented, notably by Dan Pink (2011) in his book *Drive*. Basically, some companies allow their workers one day per week to work on passion projects. Several inventions that have developed from 20% time policies include 3M's Post-it note and Google Translate.

While the topic of the blog is up to the students, I show them examples of successful blogs from past students when I introduce the topic. In addition, I provide brainstorming time and feedback on their potential topics before they start. For example, past students have written blogs reviewing donut shops, highlighting local graffiti artists, sharing information about the saint of the week, highlighting the problems of sexual abuse, sharing tips for making the planet greener, and informing us of uncommon sports. Appendix C shows the assignment sheet for this project.

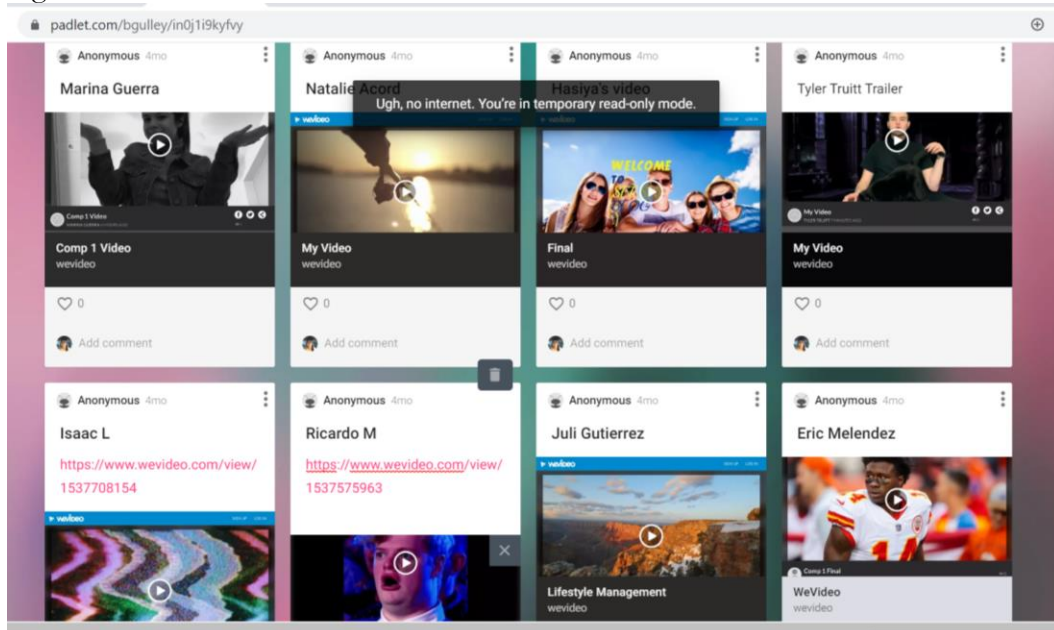
Most of the time, I allow students to work on their blogs at home, but from time to time we check in on them during class. Like my developmental writing students, my composition students enjoy reading and commenting on each other’s blogs. Last fall, one student mentioned that her classmate’s blog on weird sports “was a fun blog to read. I didn’t know that so many crazy sports existed like the wife racing one.” Sometimes reading classmates’ blogs can be practical, too. Another student commented, “I’ve just got a car so it was very good to learn one more thing about cars.”

Student Created Video Trailers

For the final Composition I assignment students conduct an audience analysis for their blog, select three posts to revise, write a script, and then create a video trailer about their blog. At our college, we use WeVideo software to make the trailers (www.wevideo.com). Other video editing software would work just as well. However, WeVideo is designed for educational purposes and is available for free on the internet. WeVideo also provides classroom-ready instructional materials for novice video editors.

The trailer project encourages students to think about who might have an interest in their writing and how best to catch their attention. Since the video script is brief, students have a chance to demonstrate their concise writing skills. On the last day of the semester, we screen the videos (which are 1-2 minutes long). Many students also add the trailer as the final blog post of the semester. Appendix D contains more information about the video trailers.

Figure 2: Student Video Trailers



Student Responses to the Blog Assignments

In his 1993 article “Ranking, Evaluating, and Liking: Sorting out Three Forms of Judgement,” Peter Elbow suggests that “people who get better and get published really tend to be driven by how much they care about their writing” (p. 200). He goes on to say that finding other people who like what you write also leads to improved writing. Comments from developmental writing students and Composition I students suggest that the blog assignment has the potential for students to find a “liking” for writing and an audience.

A developmental writing student shared, “I never had fun writing until the first blog post we were assigned... the fact that I can create this world where anything happens is really appealing.” His sentiment is echoed by a classmate who wrote, “Now since I am in college, I am used to writing, I still keep a journal, and I actually enjoy doing my blog posts.”

In a survey of 32 Composition I students, seven mentioned the blog assignment specifically when answering the question “What part of this class helped you to learn?” This was the third highest of all responses. By contrast, no one mentioned the blogs at all when answering the question “Which parts of this class were least helpful for your learning?”

A nontraditional student wrote that “doing the blogs and journals were useful to me because it got me writing more. Although it seemed at the time like too much, it actually wasn’t and helped out with my paper.” Several of his classmates mentioned that the blogs were “neat” and “I enjoyed it.” This sentiment was echoed by another student who shared “I also enjoyed the blogs and being able to write our own ideas.” Finally, this student’s positive attitude towards writing the blog is clear: “The blog assignment is awesome because it lets you explore your personal interests in different forms of media.”

I offer these student reflections as evidence that the blog assignments have potential to change the classroom conversation from deficit or dislike to personal interests and joy. Other reasons exist to teach blogging and video editing. For example, NCTE’s 2019 position statement “Definition of Literacy in a Digital Age” highlights nine reasons students should be digitally literate. Among NCTE’s reasons students should learn digital literacy, “Consume, curate, and create actively across contexts” and “Recognize and honor the multilingual literacy identities and culture experiences individuals bring to learning environments” can be met through the blogging assignments, too. While these may be true, the joy factor is why I assign them.

Conclusion

If, like me, you are looking for new ways to encourage your students to fall in love with writing, please feel free to borrow from these assignments. I have included The Prompts Blog Final Exam, The 20% Time Blog Assignment, The Video Trailer Assignment, and The Top Fifteen Prompts in the appendix. As I start the new semester, I expect to meet new people whose relationship status with writing is “complicated” or “hate/hate.” I hope to help them find they like what they have to say and to care about it enough to make others care too.

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Appendix A

Most Popular Blog Prompts

1. Describe your first brush with danger.
2. Write about the first time you defied your parents.
3. Write the story of a time you've been lost. Were you in a car? On foot? In a foreign country? Alone?
4. Chronicle the longest amount of time you've ever gone without sleeping.
5. Describe the worst date of your life. Where do you think your date is now? Do you think he or she ever thinks of you?
6. Write about the physical trait you would have killed to change in junior high school.
7. Write a description of your dream automobile.
8. Take time to write your five-year plan. Write down how you want your life to be in every aspect that's important to you. When you finish, read what you've written and think about why you want to achieve these goals. What do the goals imply about your life as it is now? What do they suggest about you as a person?
9. According to a poll conducted by the Gallup Organization, 10% of Americans say they have communicated with the devil. Write a story about one of these encounters.
10. Describe the secret life of a school bus driver.
11. According to the Florida Department of Corrections, more than one hundred people have registered on a waiting list to see an execution. Write about one of them.
12. You're very old. You're on your deathbed. (Sorry.) Family and friends gather around you. What do you tell them about life? What advice about living do you offer them? Spill a few pearls of wisdom from your experience.
13. Trace the journey of a five-dollar bill through the lives of five different owners. What was exchanged during the transactions? How much (or how little) did the transaction mean to each of the people involved?
14. Write a story that begins, "The last time I saw my mother was fifteen years ago."

Spark Words

15. Below are lists of words. Choose a word that grabs you—something that sparks a memory, an opinion, a sense of wonder, etc., and write about that. Each word in this section counts as

a separate topic, so you may write about several of these words. Just stick to one word per journal entry.

family	adventure	surprises
faith	place	roadkill
transition	leaving	insanity
health	oddballs	home
greed	player	accident-prone
superstitious	prom	hitchhiker
oops	vanity	protest
debt	bird	ouch
panic	conformity	wish
deadline	discipline	loser
music	temper	infectious
prodigy	embarrassment	clueless
strike	gossip	fear
outcast	addiction	adoption
electricity	border	extinction

All topics come directly from, or are inspired by, one of the following books:

Heffron, Jack. *The Writer's Idea Book*. Cincinnati: Writer's Digest Books, 2000. Print.
Heffron, Jack. *The Writer's Idea Workshop*. Cincinnati: Writer's Digest Books, 2003. Print.
Rekulak, Jason. *The Writer's Block*. Philadelphia: Running Press, 2001. Print.

Appendix B

The Prompts Blog Final Exam

For your final exam, instead of taking a test, choose your three best blog posts to revise. Then write a cover letter to go along with the revised blogs. At the final exam date, you will share your best blog post aloud to the class in our own version of a story slam. Below I will explain what I am looking for in each of these components.

Cover Letter

Your cover letter should use at least two sources to define what good writing is, and then it should explain in detail how your blogs are examples of good writing using the criteria from the definition. You should address the cover letter to me. I expect your letter to take at one-two paragraphs to define good writing. Please do use quotes from your two sources and cite them in MLA format. The TED Talk we watched in class can count as one of your sources. Next, write approximately one paragraph per blog post explaining how it is an example of good writing. Follow this up with a concluding paragraph. (This part should be between five and six paragraphs long.)

Blog Posts

You should choose three blog posts from the blog you have been writing all semester, copy them into a word document, and revise them for grammar, style, and content.

Final Exam Presentation

During your final exam, you will present your best blog post to the class as a finished work. The class will not give you feedback; they will only clap for you. I will bring snacks, and you are welcome to bring snacks as well. Once everyone has read their best blog post to the class and turned in the final copy of the paper, then will be done for the semester. I would like us to enjoy listening to all the blog posts but do notice that presenting your blog to the class is part of your grade, too.

This final exam is worth 100 points. It is due at your final exam time.

Appendix C

The 20% Time Blog

Companies like Google and 3M are known for giving their employees 20% of their time to pursue their own interests. The blog assignment is our class' equivalent of 20% time. You need to set up a new blog and post on it every week. The topic of the blog is up to you, though. I suggest finding a topic or framework that is broad enough that you can add to it weekly. For example, you might experiment with different recipes, give a local sports update, explore different historic sites, offer advice, evaluate music, explain how to do something etc.

The most important thing is that you pick a topic that you are genuinely interested in. In addition, your blog must have a public audience (so you should not set the privacy setting to secret or private). Finally, the blog must have an informative or persuasive aim (no creative writing this time).

The due dates for each blog post are on the syllabus. I would prefer that you use <https://wordpress.com/>, although other blog providers would work. After you have created your blog, post a link to it on this padlet. You only need to post the link one time, and then I should be able to go back to your blog at any time to check your writing. Each blog is worth 10 points and should be 300-500 words long. You should have 15 by the time the semester is over.

Feel free to add images, links, audio, and video to your blog. Write it in such a way that other people who share your interest would want to read it. And most of all, have fun with it.

Appendix D

The Video Trailer Assignment

For your final exam, choose your three best blog posts of the semester. Copy and paste them into a word document. Then revise them so that they reflect your best writing. You should include any images or links that were included in the original blog posts, too.

Next, read *The Norton Field Guide* chapter 6 on Audience. At the end of the chapter, there are ten questions you should ask when you are thinking about your audience. Think about the audience you were trying to reach with your blog post. Answer all ten questions in another word document. Please write an MLA heading on the document, but you may list the questions instead of writing in essay form. Answer the questions as completely as possible and write in complete sentences.

Then, write a 150-200-word script for a video “blog trailer.” The purpose of the blog trailer is to provide a commercial for your blog to increase the traffic there. You will also select images and possibly music to go with the script, and build the video using WeVideo software.

At your final exam time, you will screen your blog trailer for the class. You will also turn in your script, revised blogs, and audience analysis as part of your final portfolio. This project is worth 100 points of your grade.