

Eight Propositions about Writing

I've reduced about 40 years of writing research and theory into eight propositions that should inform writing in the academy. They underpin the advice that follows. I've explained some of the concepts below but would be happy to elaborate any of the rest.

1. The ability to write is the ability to generate and present ideas in language that is effective for a given audience and purpose. Good writing in novels to be read at leisure and in reports to be read to inform investment decisions share unhelpfully little in common.
2. Writing is a mode of learning. Assigning writing is a powerful mode of teaching.
3. Informal writing exercises both complement formal writing assignments and are valuable in their own right. For many classes, frequent short writing assignments are preferable to infrequent long ones.
4. Learning to write is not like getting vaccinated against measles. People learn to write by writing, not by being told about writing. "Telling" has some value, yes, but telling without doing has little value.
5. Writing strategies that seem obvious and natural to professors have been internalized through repeated writing experiences. Students have not yet had the same experiences.
6. Writing is a complex of many intertwined activities. New or more challenging writing situations may cause interference among these activities, and some writing skills may actually appear to degrade.
7. Learning a discipline also means the particular ways of learning to write in that discipline. This is a natural developmental process. Just as one doesn't expect freshman chemists or historians to know all of chemistry or history at age 19, neither should one expect them to know how to write chemistry or history.
8. *Effectively* responding to student writing does not mean *exhaustively* responding to student writing.

