WRITING MATTERS:

BACK TO THE FUTURE WITH RHETORIC
THE PAST FOUR DECADES have seen dramatic developments in the study and teaching of writing. Theorists, researchers, and teachers have created a complex and detailed account of writing by drawing on a rich variety of sources, including the classical rhetorical traditions of Greece and Rome, contemporary studies of cognition, the sociology of knowledge, research into academic and workplace writing, and new literacy theories. The result is a body of knowledge about writing that has profound practical and pedagogical implications for teaching, thinking, and learning across the curriculum.

LANGUAGE AND RHETORIC
Before considering some of those implications, it might help to step back from the phenomenon of writing to take a broader look at language itself, that remarkable and uniquely human activity. Language can be thought of as a human invention, a technology, a designed and deliberate way of acting in and on the world. We might be, as some have suggested, genetically programmed for language – ‘hard-wired’, as they say – and we are certainly well suited for language physiologically: the human tongue and mouth are capable of shaping the noise produced by our vocal chords into an infinite variety of sounds. But those squeaks and grunts and barks must be transformed by humans into what we know as language: an always-evolving agreement among people over time and space about what particular spoken or written symbols will mean and how we’ll use them to make meaning together.

For most of us, that social contract and its many sub-jurisdictions are invisible; language is just there – a human activity that surrounds us, as natural and ubiquitous as air. And yet, language is a complex set of rule-governed, interrelated systems, and we must know those systems to employ language correctly, appropriately, and effectively. Two speakers of English, even in casual conversation, are performing an extraordinary feat. With dizzying speed and fluency, building on each other, they explain, agree, respond, question, elaborate, and so on. They do this without apparent reference to rules of any sort; that is, they make meaning on the fly, adhering all the while to rules of semantics, grammar, syntax, cohesion, and pragmatics that, for most people, are understood only implicitly. The immense fund of knowledge needed to engage in even simple social interaction is mostly implicit: we can use it, but we can’t explain it.

Humans are so adept at mastering this practical, applied knowledge that by the age of five they are able to form and understand a virtually infinite number of sentences they’ve never heard before and to deploy their tacit language resources for a wide variety of new and unfamiliar purposes – all without much, if any, instruction. This is because we are, first and foremost, rhetorical beings; we know what language is, because we know what language does.

Of course, I am using ‘rhetoric’ here not in its debased, contemporary sense of inflated or empty language, but in its older sense of language that is deliberately shaped to produce certain ends or outcomes. For Plato, rhetoric was “the art of winning the soul by discourse,” and for Aristotle it was “the faculty of discovering in any particular case all of the available means of persuasion”; contemporary rhetorical and literacy scholars would say that all language seeks to persuade or influence or affect. We want our words to have an impact, to make a difference, to do something. Moreover, this impulse to persuade, and its infinite manifestations, is a fundamental and defining human trait.

EN BREF Les quatre dernières décennies ont vu des progrès remarquables dans l’étude et l’enseignement de l’écriture. Le résultat compose une masse de connaissances au sujet de l’écriture qui comporte des implications pratiques et pédagogiques marquées en enseignement, en réflexion et en apprentissage dans le curriculum. Cinq aspects de l’écriture peuvent se répercuter sur l’ensemble du programme pédagogique et les niveaux scolaires. 1) L’écriture est heuristique, favorisant l’exploration intellectuelle. 2) Le texte écrit est amélioré par un processus d’écriture bien encadré. 3) Le produit fini est structuré de façon à avoir l’effet voulu. 4) Les textes ont des conséquences; ils provoquent des choses. 5) Les textes (processus et produit) reflètent leurs contextes – les collectivités pour lesquelles ils sont écrits. Nous voulons que les élèves saisissent les meilleurs savoirs des matières que nous enseignons, mais nous voulons aussi qu’ils participent aux pratiques et aux procédés engendrant le savoir. L’écriture est essentielle à ce processus.

LANGUAGE IS A TECHNOLOGY... BUT IT IS NO SIMPLE OR SINGLE-PURPOSE TOOL. IT IS THE ULTIMATE SWISS ARMY KNIFE, WITH A DIFFERENT IMPLEMENT FOR EVERY USE OR PURPOSE WE CAN DREAM UP.

To appreciate how basic rhetoric is to human language and activity, consider that babies produce recognizable intonation patterns before they can speak any words. In gibbonish or baby talk, they make statements, ask questions, demand attention; they even appear to tell jokes and stories. In other words, we are rhetorical before we are linguistic. We can do things with language well before we have actual words or grammar. And it only gets better, or worse, as the case may be: as any parent of a two-year-old can tell you, a child who has learned such one-word sentences as ‘no’ and ‘why’ can exert a powerful rhetorical influence. We learn first, and very early, that language has consequences, that language makes things happen.

In this way, then, language is a technology: it can be used to do things; but it is no simple or single-purpose tool. It is the ultimate Swiss Army knife, with a different implement for every use or purpose we can dream up. In our daily lives we use language to ask, amuse, inform, tell, demand, propose, and on and on through an endless list of routine rhetorical tasks. At a more sophisticated level, and in complex collaboration with others, we use this basic quality of language to shape specific results: we design and regulate language practices in law to produce justice, in governance to produce policy, in education to produce learning, in business to produce profits, and in science to produce new knowledge. Different rhetorics create different knowledges.

With that view of human language as fundamentally rhetorical as a background, we can now consider some of the things we know about writing and some of the ways in which that knowledge might matter in classrooms.
WRITING IS HEURISTIC
First, like language generally, writing does more than express meaning or knowledge; it makes meaning and knowledge. Despite common injunctions—“Think before you speak” or “Choose your words carefully”—we rarely assemble language in our heads before we speak or write. Certainly, most written texts do not emerge fully formed; they are crafted, composed, and unfold through a process of transforming ideas into language. I’ll return to a consideration of that process below, but first I want to reflect on the heuristic effect of writing; that is, on the ways in which writing promotes intellectual exploration, problem-solving, and discovery. John Gage puts it this way:

Writing is thinking made tangible, thinking that can be examined because it is on the page and not in the head, invisible, floating around. Writing is thinking that can be stopped and tinkered with; it is a way of holding thought still long enough to examine its structures, its possibilities, its flaws. The road to a clearer understanding is travelled on paper. It is through an attempt to find words for ourselves in which to express related ideas that we often discover what we think.

This generative or creative power of language is both personal and social. Language allows us to make sense for and of ourselves. We employ this heuristic potential when we chat with a friend about a problem that’s bothering us, write in a diary or journal, visit a therapist, or write our way into new understanding when we are drafting something. But we also use it in collective practice when we brainstorm ideas with colleagues, engage in public debate, or circulate a position paper within an institution.

I think the last point is critical: for writing to achieve its heuristic potential, it helps to allow for chance-taking, which usually means writing that isn’t graded.

In school, writing is too often treated as the end of the thinking process—the result of teaching and learning—and the written artifact becomes the object of assessment. Students are discouraged from pushing their written ideas beyond the safe or mundane because they risk criticism and failure, and as a result they produce bland and boring essays.

THE KNOWLEDGE THAT WRITING IS A PROCESS MATTERS BECAUSE
IT ALERTS US TO THE NEED TO ENCOURAGE STUDENTS TO TAKE THE TIME AND TO MAKE THE EFFORT THAT GOOD WRITING REQUIRES.

So how might we exploit the heuristic power of writing? Asking students to write briefly in response to a question or a course text—before opening up a class discussion—allows students to gather their thoughts, strive to articulate their ideas, and make connections in their thinking. Readers’ or writers’ logs, learning journals, or other ongoing accounts of students’ developing understanding of a topic encourage reflection. Teachers can initiate these activities with prompt-questions, by asking for written speculation about a literary character’s motivations, or by encouraging students to propose theories for a phenomenon under investigation in a science class. New technologies allow for the creation of online spaces (e.g., wikis, blogs) where students can write to each other about the course texts they are reading, the issues that arise in class, or their work-in-progress. There are also many ways in which creative or non-academic writing might promote thinking; having students write some pages from a fictional character’s diary, scripting a scene that dramatizes an historical event, or preparing the shooting script for a video documentary on local environmental issues are all tasks that would engage students in critical thinking about course topics.

WRITING IS A PROCESS
But, of course, students must also produce finished and, ideally, polished texts, texts that allow us to measure their grasp of ideas, their creativity, their application of disciplinary knowledge, and so it helps to know a second thing about writing: it is a process, a gradual movement from blank page or screen to final text. In the 1960s and 70s, the acknowledgment of this temporal and developmental dimension of writing led to a revolution in writing theory, research, and pedagogy and to what became known as the “writing process movement.”

In the early and mid-80s, the ground-breaking work of Flower and Hayes and others demonstrated that expert writers are engaged in complex cognitive, linguistic, and rhetorical processes as they compose. They are planning, setting goals, considering readers, producing and reviewing text, editing, revising, generating and organizing ideas, and so on. Inexpert writers, by contrast, are often stuck at the level of text production, and they are engaged far too early in editing and revision.

The knowledge that writing is a process matters because it alerts us to the need to encourage students to take the time and to make the effort that good writing requires. As it is, students frequently pull all-nighters to meet course deadlines, and we are all too familiar with the rambling, semi-coherent results of that abbreviated writing process. For major course papers, providing time and support for a more expert-like process might mean staging or sequencing writing assignments: requiring a goal statement or proposal early in the term, for example, an annotated bibliography a little later on, then an outline, and finally—two weeks before the due date—a draft of the full paper. Not only does this reduce the likelihood of plagiarism, it makes reflection and revision far more possible. And teachers don’t have to correct or even look too closely at the intermediate stages of the paper, although collecting and recording the existence of the stages might be a good idea.

Each phase of that elongated writing process could be enriched by prompts from the teacher—prompts that might produce reflective writing in the students’ notebooks. Early on, for example, teachers might ask students to think and write about what they hope to achieve with their paper. Later, they could be asked to define key terms, to jot down a quick outline, or to anticipate a reader’s questions. Intermittently, students might be asked to comment in their writer’s log or in brief conversations with classmates about the progress of their papers: what problems are they experiencing or do they anticipate? Are course readings helping them frame their topic or develop their thesis? These invitations take advantage of the heuristic potential of writing and link the students’ thinking to their writing processes.

Closer to the deadline, students can be asked to exchange drafts, to read and respond to others’ texts. In most professional writing, including academic writing, people ask colleagues to read drafts, and reviewers and editors are
certainly a critical part of the scholarly publishing process, so I am often surprised to hear students say that they have never passed a draft along to a classmate. Here, again, technologies can help: students can post drafts to each other online and respond to classmates’ papers. Those responses can be much improved if teachers supply students with a list of their own key concerns and questions. If good writing is good rhetoric, we need to help students deliberately shape their arguments.

WRITING BECOMES A PRODUCT

Now, of course, attending to writing as a process doesn't erase or diminish the physical fact that writing is also a product, and that’s a third thing we know about writing: there on the page or screen is a material object with sections, block quotes, paragraphs, headings, graphs, tables, pictures, boldface, italics, numbers, and other graphic resources that carry meaning. Underpinning that physical appearance are sets of relations between and among ideas, narratives, and various logical structures. Hypertext makes this component design of written products dramatically apparent — a fact I’ll come back to — but paper texts also contain separate elements: tables of content, indices, introductions, transitions, summaries, and conclusions. Again, rhetorically speaking, each of those separate sections does something, performs some function, makes writers and readers think in different ways.

One way we can use this knowledge about writing is by explicitly naming the parts of the texts we want students to produce, and explaining what each part should do. What is the logic supporting the lab report’s layout? Why is information presented in a particular sequence? Is a literature review a straight listing of texts, or is there a form or pattern underlying the effective review? How much and what kind of information should a summary contain? What are the components of a successful essay or term paper or case study, according to the teacher who assigns it?

If teachers can break down the texts they ask students to produce and articulate the logic of that design, students will be in a better position to produce effective texts. This is often a challenge: form is historical and disciplinary, and though we know what’s correct and effective when we see it, we sometimes can’t explain or justify it. Teachers’ attempts to articulate their standards for writing quality would benefit both teachers and students, and class discussions of what makes writing work would profitably expose the value system that supports grading — something that remains a mystery to most students.

Another way to use textual form as a rhetorical or reflective tool in teaching and learning is to ask students to work with hypertext, where the reader’s movement between textual elements is more evident, and the digital writer must be more conscious about the moments of transition, summary, and conclusion. When should readers leave a web page, and when and how should they come back? What does each page do, and how does one relate to the next? Discussions of digital literacy suggest that the new rhetorical spaces and forms provided by the web invite new ways of thinking, new ways of relating, and students are often considerably more adept and fluent in those spaces than teachers. Moreover, these are the spaces and methods of new knowledge production. The new electronic text...
is multimedia, multimodal, multi-rhetorical: it draws on a wide variety of resources, makes meaning in many ways, and has complex outcomes.

**Writing Is a Social Action**

The electronic text may also give students a far stronger sense of using texts to engage others, to communicate, to have an effect. This is a fourth thing we know about writing: it makes things happen, it has consequences. Writing is social action. We don’t write writing, we write something – a proposal, an argument, a description, a judgement, a directive – something that we hope will have an effect, produce results, change minds, spur to action, create solidarity, seed doubt. Moreover, writing is always part of some larger project or activity.

I would argue that too much school writing is arhetorical: it lacks real readers and purposes and serves merely as a display of student understanding of other people’s knowledge. Creating authentically rhetorical texts in the classroom is not easy, since school for many students seems to exist apart from their real lives, but more texture or substance in writing tasks might surprise students into authenticity. Of course, writing to display or apply knowledge is a real rhetorical goal, but what if texts could do both? What if they were directed to readers who required them for some reason and also allowed teachers to determine if students understood course content?

Designing assignments that would allow students to make use of their knowledge – that is, to be rhetorical – might mean looking beyond the classroom: science students could write about global warming, evolution, space travel, or controversial issues like stem-cell research or nuclear power for an audience of elementary or secondary students, or for local newspapers, or for the elderly in a nearby retirement home. Once again, the new technologies offer new rhetorical possibilities, and students might create online presentations that inform people about any number of issues. These are rhetorical spaces with which our students are familiar, and where they might engage real readers and find real reasons to write.

**Writing Is Situated**

A fifth thing we know about writing is that it is profoundly situated – that is, it is shaped by local circumstances, whether those circumstances be the discipline of chemistry or the neighbourhood food bank. Human collectives shape their writing practices and products to produce the ways of knowing and the knowledge required to advance their goals. The differences are not just in the physical form or even the content of written products, however. The literary essay, experimental article, quarterly report, newspaper editorial, and ethnographic account all advance different types of argument, using different kinds of evidence, and making different sorts of claims. In some areas, knowledge statements can only be defended by reference to empirical evidence, while in others, logical or syllogistic support is sufficient, and some arguments gain credibility by evoking emotional or affective states. How is an argument in history different from an argument in linguistics, and how is the knowledge each creates distinctive? How are those knowledge differences from physics knowledge or anthropological knowledge? And how are those differences reflected in writing practices?

As teachers, we hope that the writing we assign will engage students with our subjects, and so we need to be as clear as possible about the rules of the game. As they move from course to course, teacher to teacher, our students face a bewildering range of rhetorical demands – some idiosyncratic, of course, but many discipline-based; and in either case, whether we impose personal or disciplinary standards, we need to articulate what we expect and why we expect it.

**Conclusion**

These five things we know about writing can have an effect across the curriculum and the grade levels: writing is heuristic; the written text is improved by a well-supported writing process; the finished product is structured in particular ways to have certain types of effect; texts have consequences, they make things happen; and texts (process and product) reflect their contexts. We want our students to grasp the best of what is known in our subject areas, but we also want them to take part in the practices and procedures that make disciplinary knowledge. Writing is central to that process.

Aristotle’s definition of rhetoric as “the faculty of discovering in any particular case all of the available means of persuasion” might well serve as a definition for learning more broadly. When we learn to be engineers, or scientists, or lawyers, or doctors – when we learn to participate in the intellectual life of any discipline or enterprise – we are learning to assemble the accounts, the arguments, the available means of persuasion. Because of this, we are all teachers of rhetoric.

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A version of this paper appeared in *Compendium 2, 2*(1).

**Notes**


