by Marjorie Kirrie

PROMPT WRITING IS NOT IMPROMPTU

Let's say that you are an experienced classroom teacher who has been asked to create some prompts for a writing assessment. You have had no experience in writing such prompts, but the task seems simple enough. "No big deal," you murmur as you begin mentally to list all the impromptu writing assignments that have worked well in your classroom.

But there is a great difference between preparing writing prompts for your own students and preparing them for students in a large assessment population. In your classroom, personalities are very important, and much of the success of your writing assignments is due to shared experience and expectations. That experience and those expectations occasion a considerable amount of reciprocal tailoring. You tailor topics for the students in your class, and they respond in terms of what they think you want and know you like. The shared experience extends even to grading the papers, for you, perhaps unconsciously at times, make charitable allowances for one student (he tries so hard, and he's having a rough time at home) or another (she usually does much better; maybe she wasn't feeling well).

The assessment process, however, is depersonalized. With the small exception of the students in your class, who may or may not be included in the assessment and who probably won't recognize you in the assessment format anyway, the participating students do not know you, nor you them. Any kind of tailoring is impossible, and only what a student puts on the page determines the score on the paper. The first rule of prompt writing, then, is to distinguish clearly between your classroom and the assessment situation and to realize that your classroom assumptions, expectations, and practices do not extend to the assessment population.

"Okay, point taken." To deal with the problems of assessment outside the classroom, you cleverly decide to make the prompts so specific that students will know exactly what to do. You include some helpful suggestions for development. Then another idea occurs to you: an assessment prompt should fire imaginations, induce creativity. You work to make your prompts catchy and clever. Eventually, you have a list of structured prompts

(Continued on next page)
that you think ought to produce good results. But the chances are that they won’t.

**Overwriting**

As a novice prompt writer you may have compensated for the demands of assessment by overwriting. You shore up topics with all kinds of directions: “You are writing to...,” “You have met a...,” “Tell about...,” “Tell how...,” The series of directions tends to dictate the structure of the students’ responses, and essay after essay is little more than a stringing together of attempts to cope with each “Tell” in the exact order given in the prompt. When prompts are overwritten, they not only deter students from making their own essay structures but also frustrate originality of thought and freshness of expression. Complaints that assessment essays are dull and monotonously alike are more often than not unrecognized criticism of overwritten prompts.

Bad as is the superfluity of directions, the overwriting often does not stop here. The tendency is to overwrite still more in an attempt to ensure the originality and freshness that have already been stifled. In addition to being asked to address a specific unreal audience, students are also asked to imagine themselves in situations alien to their world (“You are writing to a pen-pal...”) or to imagine themselves as other entities (“If you were...”) who can only be written about in subjunctive and conditional modes, traps for all except the highly skilled. Incidentally, any “How to” topic, because it invites students to use the imperative, gives them little opportunity to display their writing skills.

**Specifying Audience — Why?**

Many writing instructors believe that specifying an audience helps students write better. This may be a skill we wish to help students develop, but audience specification often makes the writing chore needlessly difficult and calls for greater rhetorical sophistication than many students have. Besides, no matter how poorly they write, students never forget the real audience for assessment writing; they know that their efforts will be read by teachers and other educators, no matter what the fictitious stance of the prompt.

Furthermore, some audiences call for less sophisticated diction and syntax than we would like to see students produce in a test situation. (“Write to a best friend...”) We do better to ask the student to address the general, adult audience represented by the actual readers of the essays. It may not be the only kind of audience he must learn to address, but it is a large and important one.

What, then, can you do to make certain that an assessment prompt will work? To begin with, you can keep it as non-directive as possible. If it is to provide all students with an occasion to do their best writing, the prompt should have the widest possible evocative range. A good prompt can be made from any word, phrase, or brief statement which invites a variety of interpretations and responses. If a word or phrase is used, for example, “plastic” or “living in the past,” it should have several literal and metaphorical meanings. A statement should give students as many options as did the quotation from Pogo used in last year’s College Board English Composition Test essay, “We have met the enemy and he is us,” which elicited everything from historical exposition to commentaries on language usage. As for additional directions, variants of “Write an essay on what . . . means (suggests) to you,” together with the advice that examples may be helpful and that good writing will be appreciated, are all that are needed. Prompts must, of course, be appropriate in content and form to the grade level(s) being assessed.

Now, let’s say that you have written a prompt which will give students the opportunity to write well. Is it ready to be used in an assessment? No. There is still one indispensable step: pre-testing. The prompt should be pre-tested with a representative group of students who are as close as possible to the assessment population. Only by seeing what students do with and to a prompt can you be sure it will work. Fullness and variety of responses are the touchstones. Oftentimes, pre-test results seem to indicate that a spot of editing is needed to ensure good results, but don’t merely edit and then use the prompt for assessment. Pre-test the edited version. Your editing may yield unanticipated results. Remember that an assessment prompt ought to elicit the students’ best writing, and only the utmost care in its preparation and pre-testing can give students the opportunity they deserve.

Marjorie Kirrie, Professor of English, Portland State University; Chief Reader for the College Boards, BAWP Summer Fellow ’79.