Let's say that in the last year, three serious traffic accidents have occurred near your school at the corner of Sycamore and G streets. Now, in your class it's time for a persuasive essay prompt, and one of your students decides to convince the reader (you) that it is time to install stop signs at this dangerous intersection. The student does a more than capable job, performing on-the-spot observations at the intersection, interviewing police officers, collecting anecdotes from students who have experienced close calls at this corner. This is "A" work, and when you hand back the papers you make the student aware of your enthusiasm for her arguments. But, alas, there are still no stop signs at Sycamore and G.

The problem is, of course, that you are neither the chief of police nor the mayor, and those are the folks who should be hearing these arguments. The obvious answer, but one that alluded me until fairly recently, is that the student should have communicated directly with these officials; she should have been encouraged to engage in what is these days called authentic writing. Authenticity is a key concept that I have learned to keep in mind when designing writing prompts.

Traditionally trained, I was not introduced to the concepts of audience, purpose, and form as integral components of writing assignments until I participated in a writing project. Previously I made writing assignments that required students to write academic pieces such as essays, themes, or reports. My students knew I was the only person who would read their finished work. They also knew that my primary reason for reading their writing was to assign a grade.

Now I ask students to write pieces for a genuine audience beyond the classroom, using a real-world form such as a letter to the editor. Their purpose is to communicate effectively with that reader whether to persuade the reader to agree with their position on an issue, share their sentiments in a memoir, present their solution to a mutual problem, or explore numerous other possibilities determined by the student/writer. Writing for audiences beyond the teacher using authentic forms, and writing for real reasons, produces more effective writing.

I want to describe some of the authentic writing prompts I have used, but at the outset I want to make clear what authentic writing is not. Sometimes we become creative in our lesson planning and ask students to assume the persona of someone else and write a piece from that person's perspective. They may become homeless persons, presidents, or characters in literature. Role playing of this sort can provide a useful exercise, but it is not authentic writing. Authentic writing implies that the student is writing in his or her voice to a real living person or group about a matter of concern. A role playing prompt may have valuable writing-to-learn potential, allowing a teacher to see how well a student understands a concept, but it allows little room for developing a personal voice.

When I have asked students to write from a perspective other than their own, I have added yet another challenge to the one they were already facing when I asked them to compose, revise, and edit. This is an unnecessary writing burden that can be avoided if I design prompts that allow
students to write from their own knowledge and perspective in their own voices.

Consider two writing assignments:

"Imagine you are the drama critic for your local newspaper. Write a review of an imaginary production of the play that we have just finished studying in class." This prompt asks students to assume the contrived role of a professional writer and drama critic. Most students, even if they happen to be familiar with drama reviews, would not be able to successfully assume that persona therefore producing a piece that would have problems not only with voice but also with meaningful support and development. The result: the piece striving for authenticity would in fact be inauthentic.

I developed a more effective alternative: "Write a letter to the producing director of your local theater company in which you present arguments in an effort to persuade him/her to include a production of the play that we have just finished studying in class in the upcoming season." The student is expected to state and defend a position. Yet this prompt allows the student to write as herself, in her own voice. Writing in her own voice, she builds into her argument concrete references to personal experience. Of course, this prompt would constitute authentic writing only for those students who, in fact, would like to see the play produced. Note the naturalness with which Jeff, who was an advocate for Shaw’s *Caesar and Cleopatra*, communicates with his audience:

Dear Mr. Jory,

Recently we held an election for President of our country. We saw many examples of fighting, bickering, and debating between the candidates. All of this was intended to convince the American people to choose the ‘right’ candidate for their leader.

In George Bernard Shaw’s *Caesar and Cleopatra*, Ptolemy and Cleopatra are vying for power using verbal sparring and subtle threats in much the same way as today’s presidential candidates. Why not show the public that the methods of political competition have not changed in two thousand years? Anyone who has watched the election closely would not only find this parallel intriguing but enlightening.

Jeff mailed his letter and in fact received a reply from the producing director that gave Jeff and his classmates insight into the director’s play selection considerations. The producing director wrote that *Caesar and Cleopatra* was “simply too expensive for Actors’ Theatre to perform because of the large number of people in the cast and the stage setting demanded.”

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The director also invited our class to attend a dress rehearsal at the theater, an example of how a piece of authentic writing helped us build an authentic link to the community.

The basic question for the teacher in developing authentic prompts is, “How can I turn what could be an academic exercise into something real?”

After studying Dickens’ *A Tale of Two Cities*, I might once have asked students to respond to a typical prompt, a variation on, “Write a literary analysis essay in which you analyze the strengths and weaknesses of Dickens’ *A Tale of Two Cities*.”

We English teachers have been giving such assignments for decades and decrying the unimaginative writing that results. But now, as a creator of authentic prompts, I had another idea: I pulled out Brian Ford’s February, 1993 *English Journal* article, “Choosing the Canon” and asked students to read it. I asked them to write to Ford stating “your position regarding his thesis that *A Tale of Two Cities* should be eliminated from the curriculum. Then defend your position with sound arguments and reasoning.” By identifying a concrete audience and specific purpose in the prompt,
students were able to write without trying to figure out what they imagined I wanted them to say, which so often happened when I used non-authentic analysis prompts. Rather, students were clear about how to proceed in developing their pieces and free to write in their own voices rather than trying to emulate some imagined academic tone.

To my pleasant surprise, only a small minority of students agreed with Mr. Ford’s thesis that A Tale of Two Cities should be eliminated from the high school curriculum. The following representative samples demonstrate the genuineness of the students’ voices. This is not the style students adopt when they are writing what they think the teacher wants to hear. Andre’s response:

You say the book is politically naive, but that is exactly what is needed at the point this book is taught. Most students who read this are also just learning about the history of France, including the Revolution. Many would be completely lost if this book was a complex analysis of French government. This book helps give a basic grasp of what went on during the French Revolution without seeming to be teaching.

Ryan finds A Tale of Two Cities attractive to modern teens in a way Ford has overlooked:

When one thinks of teenagers, what are some television shows that come to mind? Perhaps soap operas or “Beverly Hills 90210.” Now ask: what are the elements of these programs that make them so appealing to teenagers? The answer is simple: romantic intrigue. A Tale of Two Cities has romantic intrigue in abundance.

Similarly Jill:

How do you propose to get a class full of teenagers, with their minds on dates and zits, rather than Dickens and Shakespeare, to read a novel, if it’s boring? If we have to cut short our phone time, and read a book, the book better be entertaining, or else it’ll end up in the back pack, unread. For me, that didn’t happen with A Tale of Two Cities. The book was so full of twists and turns, that it was hard to put down. At the end of each installment was a catch that made me want to read on. All the scandalous excitement in the novel made it very appealing to me and my classmates.”

Very few, if any, of my literary analysis essay prompts have generated such genuine, authentic, natural, and readable responses.

Unlike our local theatre director, Brian Ford did not answer my students. One of the real world messages built into the authentic writing process is that even the sincerest communication may be ignored or otherwise fall through the cracks. On another occasion my students wrote letters to Steve Martin inquiring about his writing process in adapting Rostand’s Cyrano for his screenplay Roxanne. Despite research into probable addresses, letters were returned as undeliverable or else we heard nothing at all.

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Providing prompts that identify an authentic audience, purpose and form for students before they begin composing is certainly not limited to literary response writing assignments. For example, sources abound in the newspaper: “Write a piece for the ‘Bright Ideas’ column that appears daily in the Features section of our local newspaper.” (This feature solicits contributions from readers.)

Shannon wrote:

It’s been raining all day; therefore you’d rather stay in out of the mud. So much for being a couch potato because only re-runs are showing today. Now you are sitting home alone and bored to death. Here’s an idea you may want to try: make a ‘Things To Do Kit.’

Robbie’s effort may have had the effect of increasing local sales of a certain soft drink:

Do you ever have trouble cleaning those big dirty windows outside? Well, if you’re like me you do, and I have a tip for you that may be very useful in cleaning them. Take one cup of vinegar and mix it
with 1/3 of a cup of baking soda. Even though it may sound weird, it's time to add an odd ingredient which, nevertheless, works. That weird ingredient is Coke, but you must make sure that it's a can of Coca-Cola Classic.

Yet another source of authentic writing has been our own school. My students developed a high school survival guide for freshmen. Charlos told a cautionary tale:

Do you know how to survive high school?? What do you need to know about how to survive? And how can you make surviving it simple for you?

Here's Bob. Bob is very excited about going to high school, but when he got there, things were not as he thought. Bob's grades began to fall, because he wouldn't get up early and come to school. During his times that Bob came to school, he often didn't feel like doing the work he was assigned. Bob fell a couple of months behind and never got caught up....

School is not as hard as some people think. As you enter high school, you are going to have butterflies in your stomach. That's natural don't panic. Remember your attitude makes all the difference in the world.

Another school-based prompt asked students to "develop a guide for ESL students in which you explain various English-language idioms." Joe began his entry:

The English language can be confusing and tough to learn because there are so many expressions that need to be learned in addition to the basics idioms in particular can be very strange. For instance, the phrase "birds of a feather flock together" has nothing to do with birds at all...

The ESL guide and the high school survival guide were not "published" in the traditional sense. However, I believe they both qualify as authentic writing as they were delivered to the intended audience in their classroom as a prelude to class visits. When the classes met together, the ESL students and my students discussed idioms in the various represented languages. The ninth grade students and my upperclassmen discussed high school expectations and pitfalls.

The ESL and high school survival guides have been catalogued and placed in the school media center for use by any students who would find them useful or interesting.

I do not intend to make authentic classroom writing sound easy or even always possible. I teach 150 students each day and it is not possible to direct all student writing to a real audience or publish everything students write. But authenticity stays in the forefront as I have created my prompts and because it is remains an important goal, my ideas for authentic prompts continue to blossom. My students are writing more effectively, and when I read and respond to their essays I find the experience more interesting than tedious, and sometimes, blessedly, even compelling.

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