As writing teacher but also freelance writer and editor, I rejoice to see current advanced composition textbooks emphasize sensitivity to occasion. For real-world writing profoundly requires audience-awareness. Out there, students will not be writing yet another typical theme for the teacher, concerned mainly with correctness. Nor will they be writing expressively, concerned mainly with self and authenticity. They must be writing for the occasion, to achieve specific purpose with specific readers, and hence must be concerned with effectiveness above all. But what about actual current classroom practice on this point?

Many of the more recent textbooks do highlight such transactional writing. Linda Flower’s *Problem-Solving Strategies for Writers* (HBJ, 1981) employs cognitive psychology to introduce reader-based instead of writer-based prose. Maxine Hairston’s *Successful Writing: A Rhetoric for Advanced Composition* (Norton, 1981) notes that:

... good writers never write in a vacuum. They adopt every element of their writing—tone, method, vocabulary, and choice of supporting material—to the people they are addressing...

Further, people read for two reasons: entertainment or information. A writer who confuses, bores, or threatens the reader, “has lost that reader, usually for good.” Earlier, Donald Murray’s indispensable *A Writer Teaches Writing* (1968) focuses firmly on the target-audience.

So writers, and now textbooks, embrace this pragmatism. Do the nation’s writing classrooms, secondary and even collegiate, follow suit? Quite possibly not, which may suggest that advanced composition may often have a mandate to emphasize sensitivity to occasion as the keystone skill in real-world writing which it in fact is. My own foray into freelance writing in particular—77 articles in five years, but not without initial stumbles—taught me that real-world writing in general is varied, difficult, possible, necessary, satisfying. I now feel obligated to impart some of this perspective to my advanced writing students especially.
Such is not usually being done, however, or so it would seem. As for the secondary level, a recent large-scale study of 259 classrooms and of samples from 754 teachers nationwide, found that approximately half of the writing reviewed was merely informational in purpose, and was only directed toward an audience of teachers as examiner. This might not be too bad a proportion; but only 5% of my own 100 college freshmen even recalled hearing about "the reader" in their high school courses. As for collegiate practice, only a handful of my advanced composition students claim to have studied writing for occasion in their college writing to date. Most of my department’s 25 members seem to hold to versions of the five-paragraph theme of exposition on literary or other assigned topics written to no audience in particular. Six of these or equivalent per semester thus constitute the writing portion of our required English 101-102 sequence which is mandated to contain literature and composition half and half. Of course one department is not necessarily representative. But later in the workplace, our ex-students, now employed, may well have to write to diverse people for diverse purposes: instructions to novice underlings; concise clear explanation plus summaries to half-expert committees; argument and persuasion to (among others) their superiors; persuasion plus information to the general public in brochures; and of course many things in letters.

Therefore I employ a core formula in class. It is this: if we are given the same subject, as the audience is changed, so will the topic alter, and so will purposes for writing, and the content, and the writer-reader relationship, and the style. I would thus have students write less often for teacher and rulebook, to be “correct” only, and less often for self expression, but more often for the occasion, effectively, to achieve purpose with audience. Desirable skills here include a writer’s radar-like sense about reaching the reader—any reader, then the target reader. This feedback is fostered by the writer’s assessing the audience’s image of the subject—what they know about it and think of it—plus their own motivations for reading, be these curiosity, pragmatism, idealism, or others. Also desirable is a richer stylistic palette, the writer’s shedding rigid rules for flexible tools, being able to adapt to different modes of writing, academic and real-world. Also appropriate is more autonomy in, and responsibility for, one’s own writing.

True, audience is not all. True too, the five-paragraph theme or equivalent can teach much vital material—diction, structure, the rest. Still, I now hypothesize that the nearer a writing assignment is to the
classic "student theme," the more it fails as a real kind of writing assignment—whether students, or teachers, realize this or not.

Consider the non-communicative traits of the 100% theme type of writing:

(1) The subject may be pre-assigned, not writer-chosen. A subject alien to writer's knowledge and concern, it may teach invention, but the risks are there for a sluggish and fuzzed style. (Consider in real-world writing, we always know, and care, about our subjects, are always involved, even if only because of sheer on-the-job pragmatism.)

(3) The content, or topic's slant or angle, may also be prescribed, even subtly, via a party line in a course. This blocks a writer's chance of learning to think out ideas into language, a skill which prewriting, and rewriting, fosters.

(3) The writing's purpose is often straight exposition, which deprives the writer of selecting, and mixing, purposes for audience. (Notably, the true "purpose" of most themes may not even be communication at all, not "having something to say to someone who needs to know," but rather mere pedagogy, writing to practice and prove mastery of content within the course.)

(4) The style may also be prescribed, probably formal-academic; and "rules" may still be given (such as three main ideas; at least 500 words; an example for each point; no sentence fragments or short paragraphs). But of course in reality, each and every writing "rule" that exists has its contradictory opposite.

(5) Most important, the audience of the student theme, the professor, is an involuntary captive reader who is probably an expert in the subject, and in a sense is unhurried. This audience seems special, since on the job the writer may have to clarify complex material to impatient lay-novice readers and hold their interest too.

So we might well stress this sensitivity to occasion in our classes. We might even suggest more of it in lower-level classes, where our colleagues regret the arthritic plasticity of the student themes they still assign. Any composition course can foster this superior way of relating to readers in many ways. Students can quit writing for the teacher as such, as Teacher, and write instead for a judging editor. Students can write three versions of
the same paper to as many audiences—even, or especially, a library research paper. They can write twice on the same subject, first to readers who are expert, and then to a novice; partisan, and then hostile. They can write for occasions formal and informal, and for purposes entertaining, persuasive, instructional.

My survey of the scholarship of rhetoric and composition has discovered no study which yet comprehensively details the many stylistic ways in which the various academic and real-world modes of writing do differ, the widths of the many gulfs between them, and within each mode. Below is my examination of this phenomenon. The student in English classes may find writing highly valued which is subjective, personal, figurative, even ironic. But other departments in the curriculum may have different standards. The technical writer must especially seek unambiguous statements functional in a given context. (Of course, when the technical writer writes for other than peers, for decision-makers for instance, the quiver of style must be ready with different arrows, so to speak.) Then in the business world, communication often needs a tone which is personal not academic, can often employ a style with fragments and other unconventional punctuation, and values the succinctness of a brief memo or letter as against generous development and “at least 500 words.” In short, many of us must learn to step lively between these modes, shifting personae and stylistic hues deftly. Too often we risk dragging along the residual trappings of one mode as we write in another.

I for one surely did. Five years ago, a teacher for a decade, I started doing freelance writing in my avocational field, recreational boating and nature study. I sought an apprenticeship in the craft of writing. I received same, bruises and all. From these trials, however, I now trace my fascination, indeed obsession, with composition, which I no longer consider bonehead-wearisome to teach at all. As my own first manuscripts came hurrying back from editors, I learned. About style I learned how to trim sheer wordiness and self-indulgences in diction and digressions. (My first piece, a loquacious disquisition on “wind-sense” plus too many other things nautical, was competently slashed from eight breezy pages to three tighter ones by a competent editor at Boston’s Sail magazine.) About type and purpose of writing I learned that, having written only a dissertation, a few poems, and many class handouts, I must extend myself now to do mood-pieces (on the season’s last sail); argument (in favor of simplicity of gear on board); objective evaluation (big boat vs. small boat); opinion-piece (on licensing small-boat skippers); nuts-and-bolts instruction for
tyro readers (in regard to crew work, offshore safety, knots and splices); and news releases and product evaluations too. And I had to intermix purposes. While writing a piece on anchoring, I was instructing, but also arguing, evaluating, entertaining. And I had to formulate exactly what purpose I intended with what audience.

Above all I was to learn the facets of *slanting* to audience and outlet. When I tested a new boat, I was addressing my editor, the manufacturer who is also an advertiser in the magazine, the indifferent reader seeking only entertainment, and the discerning reader seeking the honest truth about the product. When I wrote about the North Channel cruising grounds in Lake Huron, I had to slant quite variously to the so-different formulae of the fifteen magazines for which I was writing. One magazine’s stance was genial but totally fact-oriented; I had to tell how to “get ice at Joe’s” and the like. The next publication wanted no such road map at all, but atmospheric feel and mood. A third was folksy, anecdotal, and upbeat to the point of sentimentality always. Yet another market sought a suave, if also slick, style of eastern-seaboard cosmopolitanism. No wonder the freelancer, seeking to write for a certain magazine for the first time, first saturates himself in every word in each issue for the last six months.

The subtler stylistics of the freelance feature article make its writer seek a balance among more variables, of course, than most people will have to encounter while writing on their jobs. These variables included pragmatic vs. atmospheric; objective vs. personal; self as authority vs. other credibility needed; plain style vs. textured prose; audience-expertise ranging from rank greenhorn to peer expert; as for scope, once-over glimpse at subject vs. in-depth encyclopedia; a single purpose vs. multiple enrichment; fresh update, but short of being freaky or an exposé (unless of course such was the goal); a fresh feeling—or perhaps just stock-response platitudes freshly presented; tone of voice to be firm? opinionated? speculative? vacillating? enough detail to cinch but not to dilute the message; and so forth. The point is that the real-world writer must *oneself* perceive and manage all such variables, no teacher or editor at one’s side.

Consider how modes of style differ even *within* the academic sphere. As noted, other departments may feel the English-department style too literary for their students. Even within our own field, when we rework our dissertations toward books, we must shift our stances from apprentice to co-equal. When collegiate Journal X judges our piece on teaching poetry as being “too weak in theory” for them, it’s a total revamping which is yet
needed before we submit it to Journal Y, the "idea-magazine" for secondary level teachers, and of an informal slant indeed.

It's too easy to misstep between the modes. We often cling to the formal, or it to us. A fellow composition teacher, Jeanne, is distraught to learn that her article on the construction of titles, which she wrote for our department's bulletin of practical teaching tips, is judged by our editorial board to be much too purely academic in style (too impersonal, abstract, noun-heavy, passive-voiced) for the intended audience of 90% high school teachers.

In working up a unit to help students combat "officialese" (the excessively bureaucratic institutional style), my fellow team-teacher, Gary, and I find that we have to rewrite our own samples and quiz-answers quite a bit, in private, in order to excise from them all the residual formalism.

We must also learn to treat the recurrent diseases in our own styles as bad styles, no matter for what audience. My friend John vigorously excises from my own nautical manuscripts all the self-indulgent irrelevancies which I never spotted. He in turn learns wisdom as I slash out from his manuscript the florid deadwood which he never spotted.

Above all, we must write for occasion, not for self. My stepfather, a mild and genteel research physicist, drafts a letter to persuade his corporation to renew his one-year contract. Together, he and I re-slant his whole persona from that of self-effacing team member, toward that of indispensable key-person. This reached the needs and interests of his audience, the non-scientific manager concerned with pragmatic productivity.

Above all, of course, our students need to sharpen their sensitivity to occasion.

They come to us writing for the page and the professor, sincerely thinking that "good writing is half the mechanics and half whether the teacher liked it." Roberta's first theme chronicled how her series of English teachers had each required a specific, if contradictory, style. Perhaps most students still learn, not how to sense what their reader needs, but merely how to deliver what the teacher wants. Students do cling to those rules. Pat writes a five-paragraph theme well-structured, but quite
incoherent. Then, taught coherence, he produces an overly-coherent specimen, replete with redundant repetitions—and retorts in defense to my criticism, “Well, you told us to use coherence.” After half a semester of doing personally authentic writing, half of one class freezes back into the typical “English” theme-tone on their research paper which I had told them to keep informal and personal this time. The familiar modes die hard.

Or students, and others, write for self, not yet the reader. They write for no one. They draft instructions as though their audience already knew the how-to. They build arguments as if the reader already agreed. Leslie, the Advanced Composition class’s best writer, offered an abstruse philosophical analysis of charity, love, justice—as an article for a church youth group. “Well, I liked it,” was the testy response to my suggestions. Students like Lynn are rare who could easily alternate amid the diverse modes. That student wrote soberly proper literary criticism; then whimsical-sportive personal essays; then tight-and-clean journalism; then rich one-act plays as well—indeed, tough and sweet and stuffy on demand for the occasion.

We must foster student autonomy. Years ago, when I still thought students were learning to write from my giving them “the rules” in a vacuum, I assigned the course’s last paper to be written without any prescriptions from me, other than “on any subject, to any audience, for any purpose, and in any style which you choose.” The students’ instant hostility and resentment—perplexed impotence really—taught me much about the sham my course then was and showed me the great need to strengthen student judgement. But of course many “writing” courses today supply such crutches throughout, and the students may well stumble badly in the real world later.

And it can be done. As for easy practical application, the following approaches have been working better and better as I fine tune them in my own advanced course:

(1) Teach students exactly how to assess their readers before writing, as a part of pre-writing. Worksheets here can pose certain questions. What does the reader already know about the subject? What does she/he misconceive or misbelieve about it? Is reader attitude notably partisan or hostile, and if the latter, why? To what motivations of the reader, what needs and interests and values, can the writer appeal? Here also emerge common ground and reader’s frame of reference.
(2) Ask students to pre-write on one topic to plural audiences, for invention. Students speculate, via worksheet, as to how one would relate a given topic (say, vegetarianism) to differing audiences, even improbable ones: feminists? business executives? gourmet clubs? college students? campers and canoeists? religious people? Different audiences evoke different facets of subject.

(3) Then have students write on one topic for different purposes and audiences both. As of now, I omit the usual library research paper in advanced composition; too often it produces one more faceless compilation merely. Instead, I conclude the semester with a final summary project consisting of several short papers, all on one self-chosen topic but for different audiences and occasions, as follows:

(A) First, an authentic personal essay exploring and expressing one’s own reactions to the topic. Audience, one’s self at first, then “us” the class. (The writer’s relation to, and attraction to, vegetarianism: real or suspect? Is its appeal aesthetic, moral, psychological? And so forth.)

(B) Summary overview or objective evaluation concerning the topic—all the pros and cons and judicious conclusions. Audience, “general interested novice reader,” or more specific target. (Myths vs. truths about vegetarianism; common questions, common misconceptions; updates and clarifications.)

(C) Argument or persuasion to hostile audience. (Three benefits of this diet; typical objections refuted or qualified.)

(D) Instruction which enables the amateur, indeed the utter lay novice, to perform some skill or other in regard to the topic. (Basic legume cookery: do’s and don’ts and why.)

(E) A talk with an in-group of fellow peer-experts in the topic. Purpose, varied.

(F) Sheer description or vivid scene-painting. (“The Wheatberry Restaurant.”)

The above can nicely keep research papers from becoming too rote a compilation, and other papers from remaining too egocentrically personal.
One student, for example, was able to handle the topic of the metric system as follows. (A) A humorous account, to "anyone interested," of his family's first experience with the system in Canada. (B) A brief instruction and explanation to peer-novice college students in how to understand and use the system. (C) Objective evaluation as to whether or not Americans should convert; audience, educated adults. (D) For a social studies course, a formal exposition of how resistance to metrication illustrated problems in adaptation to social change.

Thus can writing for situation invigorate any composition class in any event. When the class ceases writing with "nothing to say to anyone who needs to know," via typical themes, and instead writes to communicate creatively and competently, discover and deliver dynamically, then students writing improves, as does their motivation. Teachers may then also find composition no longer a stereotyped grind, but a challenge worth almost any energy; if by no means a total delight, yet the complex and valid human activity which it is. Perhaps we should hint at this potential to our teaching colleagues who are still anti-composition, as we attempt going, not back to the basics, but forward to the reader on the spot.

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