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“What Should I Write?” Helping Students Respond to Prompts

by Nancy Mack

I began this article thinking I would focus on just persuasion. I ended up discussing all four rhetorical modes: narration, description, exposition, and persuasion, because as I was writing, I realized how vital it is to help students understand the differences.

Students have problems responding to writing prompts because they do not know what type of writing is being assigned. Therefore, students need to learn what is expected for each of the four rhetorical modes. It might seem logical to teach each mode one by one, having students read and write one mode a week for four weeks. The problem is that students often confuse one mode with another and cannot differentiate them clearly. And this is not just a problem for students. Notably, respected researcher George Hillocks (2003) critiqued testing prompts that confuse exposition and argumentation. (Exposition differs in that a topic is discussed without the need of convincing the reader that one point of view or solution is better or worse than another.)

Part of the reason why the modes are so difficult to separate is because they are rarely found in a pure form, isolated from each other. Most literary handbooks point out that the modes are often mixed together in an essay. For example, a narrative usually includes description to make it interesting, and a persuasive essay may have exposition to explain some part of the argument. So the real purpose in teaching the modes should be to help students understand the many methods available for developing a given topic. However, the fact remains that teachers still need to prepare students to differentiate the modes in order to respond correctly to prompts given by both teachers and testers. The best method I have found is to have students prewrite all four types of writing for the same topic so they can quickly experience them and articulate the differences for themselves. This article includes instructions for a model lesson as well as several extension activities.

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Introducing the Process: The Demonstration Lesson

Begin by having students fold a piece of paper in fourths lengthwise. Have students label the columns “narration,” “description,” “exposition,” and “persuasion.” This folded sheet of paper with columns is a graphic organizer that will let the students compare the four modes simultaneously when they work to analyze and define the differences in the last part of the lesson.

Next, assign the students the same general topic to prewrite for all four modes. Using a simple topic—such as a dog, a car, a school desk, or a candy bar—will make it possible to teach this lesson in one class period. Keep in mind that it is imperative to leave time for metacognitive reflection at the end. During a subsequent class period, students can practice differentiating the modes by prewriting for more difficult topics. Eventually, students can practice identifying the mode expected from a prompt and then prewriting, drafting, and proofreading a timed essay.

For this demonstration lesson, you can guide the initial brainstorming, and the students can fill out their columns individually. However, if the students are unfamiliar with this type of prewriting, you can model the activity first. Another possibility is to have the students work in small groups after your initial modeling but before they have to work alone.

Prewriting All Four Modes

Here are the directions for prewriting in each of the four columns:

Column One: Narration

On the board, brainstorm several events related to the topic that could have happened on a particular day.

- Students select one event to tell to a friend who was not there.
- Students jot down the event at the top of the first column.
- Students list how the event started or what prompted the event, three things that happened in order, and how the event ended.
- Students freewrite on the back of the column for two or three minutes about this one event, starting with the first thing on their list of what happened.

EXAMPLE:

Selected narrative topic:

Our dog runs away from home

List of events:

Sandy is afraid of loud cars and trucks.

A large truck comes to deliver cement.

Sandy runs away in terror.

She hides in the woods a mile from our house.

She is finally coaxed out after two days.

Column Two: Description

On the board, brainstorm several people, places, or things related to the topic.

- Students select one person, place, or thing to describe to an artist to paint.
- Students jot down the name of the person, place, or thing at the top of the second column.
- Students list details to describe their selection's general appearance, the names of three parts or features, and one sensory detail for each part.
- Students freewrite on the back of the column for two or three minutes about this one person, place, or thing, starting with the first entry on their list of parts.

EXAMPLE:

Selected descriptive topic:

Sandy is our golden retriever.

List of parts:

Sandy is medium-sized and reddish blonde.

She has a clean, shiny coat and a feathery, soft tail.

She has a narrow muzzle and soulful brown eyes.

Column Three: Exposition

On the board, brainstorm several processes or categories related to the topic.

- Students select one process or category to explain to a younger student.
- Students jot down the name of one process or category at the top of the third column.
- Students list the major steps of the process or three types that can be identified for the topic.
- Students freewrite on the back of the column for two or three minutes about one process or type, starting with the first thing on their list.

EXAMPLE:

Selected expository topic:

Types of tricks our dog knows

List of steps or types:

Sandy can sit and shake hands.

She can bark on cue with a spoken command.

She can sit still with a dog treat on her nose.

Column Four: Persuasion

On the board, brainstorm several issues or problems related to the topic to convince others to act upon.

- Students select one specific issue or problem to persuade a neighbor, city council member, or grant committee to act upon.
- Students jot down the name of the issue or problem at the top of the fourth column.
- Students list three reasons why the problem is important and one way it could be solved.
- Students freewrite on the back of the column for two or three minutes about one issue or problem, starting with the first reason.

EXAMPLE:

Selected persuasive topic:

Buying a dog at the pound is better than from a pet store.

List of reasons:

The dog is saved from being killed.

The community has fewer stray dogs.

Pet store dogs cost more.

People should adopt a dog from their county dog shelter.

Metacognitive Reflection

Have students write the names of the four rhetorical modes on another four-column sheet of paper. Ask the students to list the traits for the mode of writing in each column. Explain that they are to identify how each type of writing is different from the other by considering organization, pronouns, types of details, effects on the reader, situations that call for this type of writing, and important words used in assignment directions.

Once the students are done, let them share their answers in small groups in order to compile their best list of traits for each mode. Offer bonus points for the group that can think of a good analogy or symbol for each of the four categories. The best analogies may come from popular culture or the students' home environments. For example, students might draw comparisons to television programs: A *narration* is like a *situation comedy* or a *drama*, a *description* is like a *real estate program* or the *home shopping network*, an *exposition* is like a *cooking* or *home improvement show*, and a *persuasion* is like a *political advertisement* or a *commercial for one brand of pain reliever*. Finally, gather the class together and ask the groups to share their lists. As they do, create a class list of traits for each mode.

For a brainteaser, students can tell about their group work, using each of the four modes. For instance, for narration, the students could tell how they did the task in chronological order; for description, they could describe what their list looked like; for exposition, they could explain their categories one by one; and for persuasion, they could try to convince the teacher to give their group an "A" for their hard work.

Extensions

Performing skits. For a fun drama activity, students can do skits that show how the context affects the choice of the appropriate rhetorical mode. Select two students to act out each of these four contexts: a family sitting down to a holiday dinner, a lost and found office at the mall, a librarian on a quiz show, and a news reporter interviewing a politician. On filing cards, list the four modes: narration, description, exposition, and persuasion. Have each pair of students draw one mode. Give all the groups the same topic, such as Grandma, gasoline, money, turkey, running shoes, etc. Have each group plan and present a scene in which they converse in the given mode. The class can decide whether the mode matched the context or not. The point to be made is that a person in charge of the lost and found would not want, or expect, to hear a story about Grandma if she were lost—it is not the appropriate response to the situation. In the same way, test graders expect a particular type of writing when they give a certain type of prompt.

Using art. I have had success having students write about art through the Discover Writing program (http://www.daytonartinstitute.org/education/er_artconnections.html) at the Dayton Art Institute, where students visit the museum and write about paintings. You don't have to go to a museum, though. Instead you can use art prints from books, post cards collected from museums, projected images from the web, or even pages from old calendars. Observing images helps students better imagine details to include in their writing. Once again, I use the same four-column prewriting approach to emphasize the modes. For example, students can write a narrative story, a description of the scene, an explanation of the artist's techniques, and a persuasion of the merit of the painting.

Building vocabulary. To develop vocabulary, students can create word banks for the types of words and phrases that will help them to develop and organize their ideas for the different modes. Word banks, or you might prefer to call them language lists, are appropriate for all grade levels. By being able to refer to these lists, students will find it easier to write and experience less stress in bringing their thoughts into being. Even experienced writers will find collecting language lists stimulating. Students can gather or brainstorm useful words and phrases such as language that indicates time for narratives, sensory words for description, sequential words for exposition, and adverbial conjunctions for persuasion.

Analyzing different kinds of writing. For research, students can examine examples of published writing for each of the rhetorical modes and come to some conclusions about how these materials make use of the modes. The best way to begin is to generate a list of common genres that utilize each mode. Students can then read example texts and discover what qualities make good texts, how texts are organized, what types of details are used, and how texts appeal to the reader. On a higher level, students can locate paragraphs or sections of texts that utilize another mode—such as description within a text that is largely persuasive.

For investigation, students can interview a range of writers who create works of a particular mode. Questions can be prepared to ask how published authors deal with difficult writing problems and which rhetorical strategies they believe are most effective. Students can query an author who writes memoir or biography narratives, catalogue or product descriptions, textbook or direction expositions, and activist or political persuasions. Also, students can ask their parents and community members about documents that they have written or read. In some cases, published interviews or biographies of writers will list the many works these authors have created over a lifetime. For example, Helen Keller wrote not only autobiography but many persuasive texts advocating the Women's Peace Party, the rights of the Industrial Workers of the World, the NAACP, the American Civil Liberties Union, and the Actors Equity Union (Hubbard, 2002).

The ultimate—emulating the experts. For all writers, each assignment engages specific language skills that might include interpreting the task, understanding the genre, employing rhetorical modes of development, appealing to an audience, organizing information, detailing effective evidence, engaging appropriate vocabulary, and respecting conventions of print. Excellent texts utilize all these elements and more, so that isolated features become invisible to the casual reader. Teachers must engage students in investigating how the marks on the page create meaning. Composition historian Robert Connors (1981) discusses how the teaching of writing in college textbooks has switched from focusing primarily on the modes of discourse to emphasizing writing strategies. Famous authors claim to have learned the most from reading the best texts of their favorite authors. Thoughtfully investigating a work that we enjoy and contemplating its features can help us to emulate the author's techniques in our own writing.

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