
Write Like a Teacher

Translating Teaching Skills into Our Writing Practices

— James M. Lang —
University of Notre Dame

The Thesis

To reach our audiences more effectively, and expand to bigger audiences for our research and writing, we should **write like we teach**.

In Other Words ...

Academic writers create learning experiences for their readers, just as teachers create learning experiences for their students. Instead of guiding students through learning activities in the classroom, academic writers practice their pedagogy with readers on the page.

Great teaching practices can translate into great writing practices.

Your Major Takeaways

- To expand your audiences, *write like you teach*.
- *Mine your own teaching* insights and experiences to improve your writing.
- Let this process *guide your growth* both as a teacher and writer.

Why It Matters

As both human and automated voices threaten to diminish the value of academic research and ideas, the public needs to hear directly from the experts whose work can make a difference.

Our work matters.



To Promote Better Learning in Our Writing ...

- Begin with the questions
- Develop your learning objectives
- Expand evidence strategies
- Support reader attention
- Write invitational prose
- Open and close well

Begin with the Questions

An Answer-Driven Overview

“The focus of this course is on nutrient uptake and translocation, nutrient deficiency symptoms, plant primary and secondary metabolism, physiological responses to biotic and abiotic stresses, hormones and signal transduction, defense and immune responses. The laboratory component of this course will provide opportunity for students to have hands on experience and assess plants physiological behavior by determining metabolites content and enzymes activities and studying hormones and nutrients.”

The Power of Questions

“The material I want students to learn is actually the answer to a question. *On its own, the answer is almost never interesting.* But if you know the question, the answer may be quite interesting . . . we, as teachers, are so focused on getting to the answer, we spend insufficient time making sure that students understand the question and appreciate its significance.”

Daniel Willingham

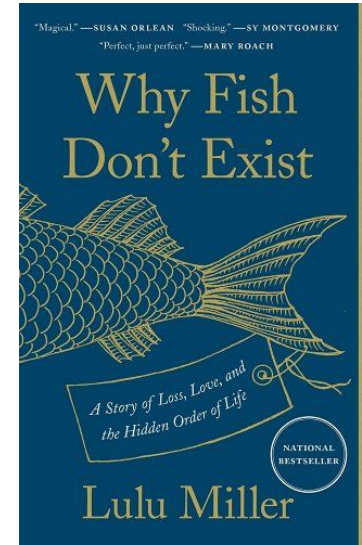
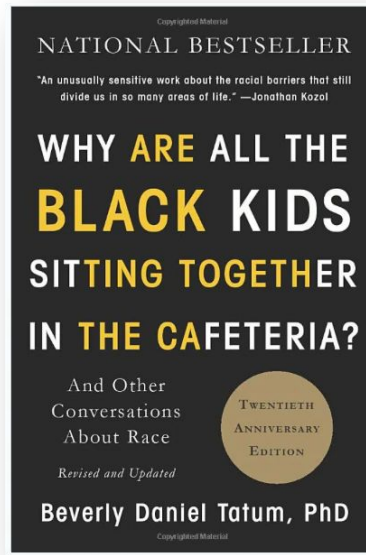
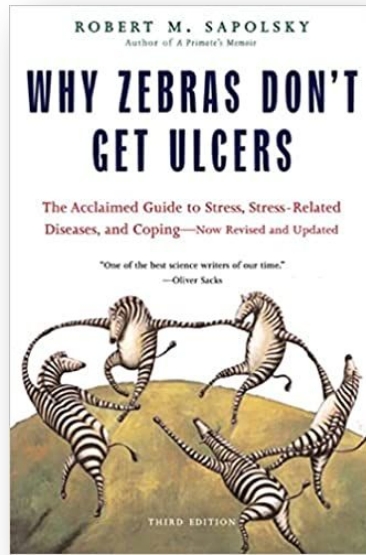
Why Don't Students Like School?

Question-Driven Learning

Can you be confident that the person sitting next to you on the bus is really a human rather than some remarkable replica conjured up by a mad scientist or, perhaps, an alien from another planet? What evidence is needed to conclude that the person casually looking at her mobile device is human? . . . How have we constructed the conceptual boundary between what we qualify as human and what we categorize as robotic, animal, android, or alien? What, in the end, makes the human “human”?

James Egan, Brown Univ.

Question-Driven Books



Braiding Sweetgrass

Robin Wall Kimmerer

“I was stunned. How is it possible that in twenty years of education, they cannot think of any beneficial relationships between people and their environment? . . . When we talked about this after class, I realized that they could not even imagine what beneficial relations between their species and others might look like. How can we begin to move toward ecological and cultural sustainability if we cannot even imagine what the path feels like?”

How and Why Questions

Academics love *how* questions. Expanded-audience writing requires addressing the *why* question that leads into the content. These questions don't have easy answers, or even answers at all.



How should we apply evidence from learning science to teaching?

Given all of the evidence we already have, *why* don't people follow those practices? What's the deep problem?

Articulate Your Question (or Problem)

Articulate both the *how* and *why* question or problem that will make a reader curious to hear your response.

For the why question, push yourself into deep territory.

Trace your journey backwards. What was the origin story of *your* interest in this question? What are the deep origins of this question or problem?

Changing Your Readers

A Publishing Axiom

If you write to *everyone*,
nobody will end up reading your work.

Defining Your Audience

The more closely you can define your audience, the more you can have an impact upon your readers—and the more appealing your project will be to editors and publishers.

- Teachers in my discipline.
- Teachers in a disciplinary grouping (i.e., STEM, humanities, social science).
- Practitioners of a technique or approach, or those curious about a technique.
- All teachers in higher education.
- Administrators; students; parents.
- Reading public.

Audience-Defining Sentences

- I wrote to college instructors who believe the system is broken, and are looking for new approaches to higher education pedagogy to revitalize themselves and their campuses . . .
- Although I believe the techniques I recommend in this essay cross disciplines, they will prove most useful in large, lecture-based STEM courses . . .
- As Aristotle wrote, “the beginning is more than half the whole,” so for that reason this book focuses on first-year courses. I hope my recommendations will prove useful to first-year instructors, departments chairs, and senior administrators who oversee first-year programs . . .

What Are Your Learning Objectives?

- How will the reader be *changed* by reading your work?
- What will your audience *do* in response to reading your work?
- Make changes to their daily teaching practices.
- Design a course or a program.
- Gain confidence in their work as teachers or scholars.
- Find new insights in the work of marginalized scholars or teachers.
- Educate themselves further about your subject.
- Join (or start) an academic or pedagogical movement.

Three Questions

- Who Is Your Audience?
- How Will They Be Changed?
- Why Do They Need Your Ideas
Right Now?

Craft the Learning Objective(s) For Your Audience

Use the next ten minutes for silent writing. After ten minutes, I will ask you either to keep writing or turn to a neighbor for a quick discussion of what you wrote. In other words . . .

- 10 Minutes of Silent Writing
- 5 Minutes of Partnered Discussion

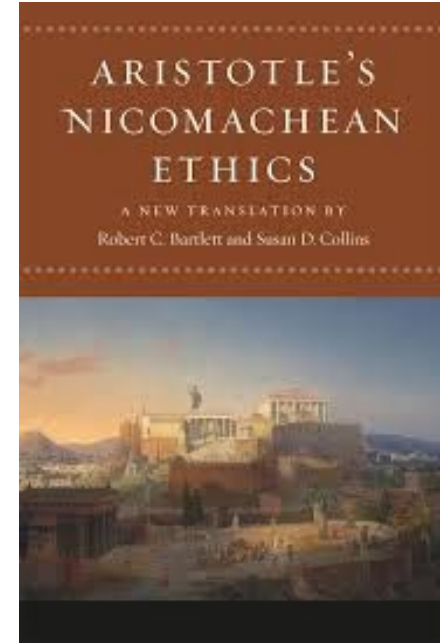
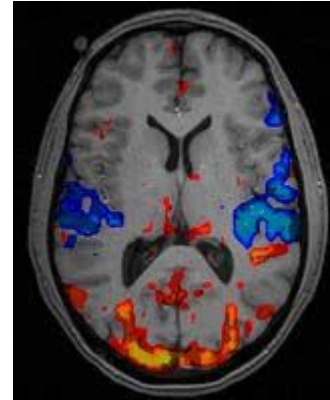
Expanding Your Evidentiary Traditions

Writing for Disciplinary Peers

“Since they were identified HIPs have become a foundational strategy to increase student retention and completion rates in institutions of higher education and have been used as a variable to study student success (McGlynn, 2014) and engagement (Sweat, Jones, Han, & Wolfgramm 2013). HIPs have also been used to explore the needs of specific student populations such as first-year students (Tukibayeva and Gonyea, 2014) and students from traditional underserved or underrepresented backgrounds (Sweat et al, 2013). Frequently discussed across a range of disciplines including university libraries (Murray, 2015), the presence of embedded HIP during a student’s academic career is now considered to be a fundamental metric for an institution’s dedication to student success (Kilgo, Sheets, and Pascarella, 2015) and campus cultures that promote and support high-quality and effective educational practices (Laird, BrckaLorenz, Zilvinskis, & Lambert, 2014).”

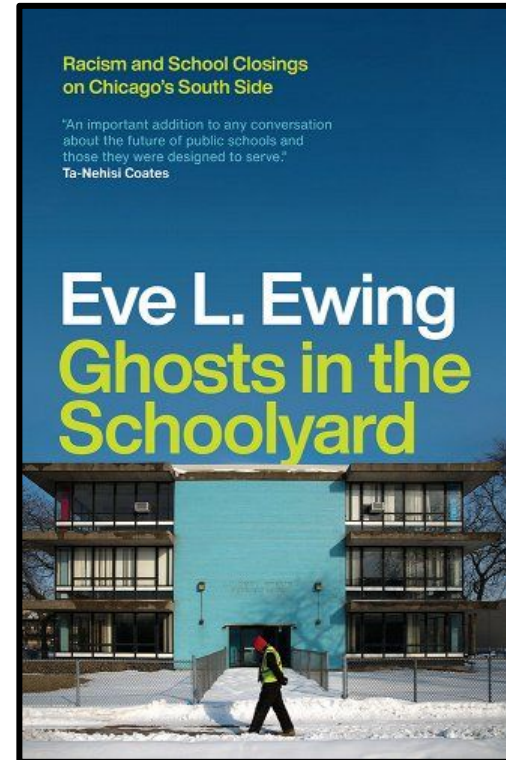
Evidentiary Traditions

	Non-smokers	All Smokers	Test of Significance* P	Men Smoking a Daily Average of:			Test of Significance† P
				1-14 g.	15-24 g.	25 g. or More	
All causes: Observed deaths	163	1,551	0.06	727	468	356	Less than 0.01
Expected deaths	187.4	1,526.6		751.2	510.2	289.6	
Lung cancer: Observed deaths	1	83	Less than 0.01	22	27	34	Less than 0.001
Expected deaths	8.5	75.5		36.9	28.3	17.9	

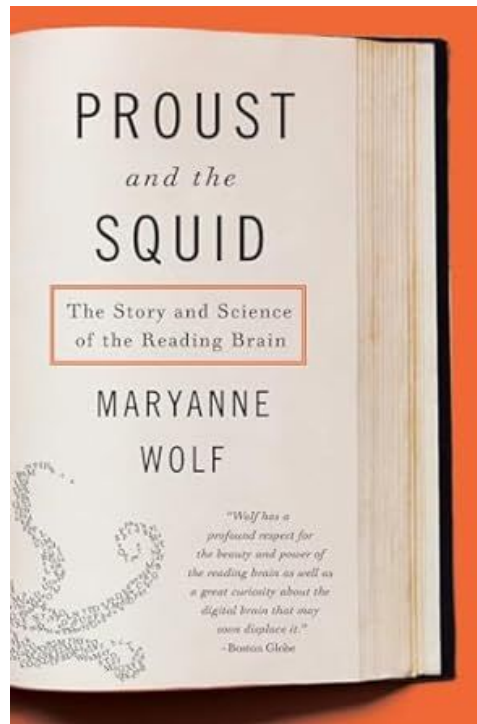


Expanding Evidentiary Traditions

“The experiential knowledge of people of color not only is a legitimate source of evidence, but is in fact critical to understanding the function of racism as a fundamental American social structure. So I cannot and do not aspire to tell you an objective story; rather I offer a story that is revelatory based on the experience of my own life and the lives of community members living in the shadow of history.”



Proust and the Squid



- **Cultural:** How Humans Learned to Read
- **Scientific:** How an Individual Learns to Read
- **Personal:** What Happens When Reading Fails?

How Will You Expand Your Evidence?

- Personal anecdotes
- Real-life examples from current events
- Hypothetical scenarios
- Quotations from works of literature
- Art works, images, photographs
- Statistic tables, graphs, chart
- Outcomes from research experiments
- Formal and informal survey results
- Casual observations of events and people
- Field notes from you or others
- Research and ideas from authorities in your discipline
- Citations from academic research
- Interviews with experts
- Interviews with relevant subjects

Q: “How Much Land
Does a Man Need?”
Leo Tolstoy

Answer:

Not as much
as you think.



Low Context

“Excessive smartphone use is linked to depression, anxiety, and poor sleep quality (1).”

<https://www.learningscientists.org/blog/2022/4/20-1>

Moderate Context

“One [date] study of smartphone use among American college students found that 25% of students surveyed reported sleep texting (2). Sleep texters were significantly more likely to have interrupted sleep, contributing to overall low sleep quality in college students.”

Full Context

“A **recent study** by **Brailovskaia and colleagues** (2022) examined the effects of smartphone use reduction and abstinence on well-being (3). A total of 619 participants were randomly assigned to one of three conditions: Abstinence, Reduction, or Control. The Abstinence group (**N = 277**) was instructed to not use their phone for 7 days. The Reduction group (**N = 242**) was instructed to reduce their overall phone use by an hour each day for 7 days. The Control group (**N = 232**) were not given limitations on their phone use. Several measures of smartphone use and well-being were assessed at **baseline (prior to the week-long intervention), post-intervention, one month post-intervention, and four months post-intervention.**”

Evidence Challenge

- What form(s) of evidence do you normally use in your writing?
- What forms of evidence could you add into that mix?

Invitational Prose

Should We Avoid Jargon?

“To be a good diagnostician, a physician needs to acquire a large set of labels for diseases . . . Learning medicine consists in part of learning the language of medicine. A deeper understanding of judgments and choices [the subject of his book] also requires a richer vocabulary than is available in everyday language.”

Daniel Kahneman

Thinking, Fast and Slow

Teaching Vocabulary

- Researchers in this field have coined a useful term for this phenomenon . . .
- You won't understand the results of this experiment unless you are familiar with the notion of . . .
- That's the word that scientists use to describe this strange finding . . .

Varying Structures

- "Successful writers vary sentence length."
- "Successful writers *who hope to expand their audiences* vary sentence length."
- "Successful writers *who hope to expand their audiences* vary sentence length *in the service of clarity and challenge.*"
- "Successful writers *who hope to expand their audiences* vary sentence length *in the service of clarity, **but they should remember that sentence complexity matters more than length.***"

Focused Paragraphs

"I still remember the exact moment when I first understood, with a sudden clarity, the purpose of a paragraph. I didn't have the vocabulary to say "paragraph," but I realized that a paragraph was a fence that held words. The words inside a paragraph worked together for a common purpose. They had some specific reason for being inside the same fence. This knowledge delighted me."

Sherman Alexie
"Superman and Me"

Supporting a Reader's Attention

Teaching to Writing

- Seeding interaction throughout a lecture.
 - Shifting formats during the class period.
 - Providing a clear outline of the learning.
 - Highlighting key words, phrases, ideas.
- Using section breaks and subtitles.
 - Signposting throughout the text.
 - A sparing use of bolding or italicizing.
 - Varying sentence and paragraph length.

Supporting Attention Text Divisions

- **Use Text Divisions** to Give Attention Breaks to Readers
- **Title Them** to Keep Readers Connected to Throughlines
- Keep the **Throughline Visible** through your Titles and Heads.

#AcademicTwitter community members are now weighing the nontrivial opportunity costs of leaving. They are also making plans in case an ongoing affiliation with the company feels intolerable. But few are fleeing the digital gathering space in which they have invested so much—at least not yet.

A Platform in Transition

Twitter is struggling to keep its most active users—those who log in six or seven days a week and tweet about three to four times a week—according to internal documents seen by [Reuters](#) last month. Such users “account for less than 10 percent of monthly overall users but generate 90 percent of all tweets and half of global revenue.”

At the same time, Twitter plans to charge users \$8 per month for account verification—a previously free feature noted by a blue icon with a check mark, usually given to celebrities, journalists and influencers. Such a move could disrupt the community in unpredictable ways, especially for academics.

Author Highlighting Tools

- *Italicized and*
Bold-Faced Text
- Bullets and Numbers
- Sentence and Paragraph Length

“Goal interference occurs when you reach a decision to accomplish a specific goal . . . and something takes place to hinder the successful completion of that goal. The inference can be generated *internally*, presenting a thoughts in your mind, or generated *externally*, by sensory stimuli such as restaurant chatter . . .”

The Distracted Mind

The Thesis

To reach our audiences more effectively, and expand to bigger audiences for our research and writing, we should **write like we teach**.

Being Good Company

Once learned, skills tend to stay with us. It's said that you never forget how to ride a bike, although old age and arthritis eventually take their toll. Yet some skill, especially those learned late, can be lost. I once accompanied my four-year old son to recorder lessons and learned to play rather badly, but I now find I can't remember a single configuration."

Michael Corballis

The Wandering Mind: What the Brain Does When You're Not Looking

Openings and Closings

Begin with Attention

- Provocative Statements
- Shocking or Surprising Statistics
- (Well-Told) Stories
- Intriguing Facts

Provocative Statements

“People like to masturbate. They also like to get drunk and eat Twinkies. Not typically all at the same time, but that’s a matter of personal preference.”

Edward Slingerland
*Drunk: How We Sipped, Danced, and
Stumbled Our Way to Civilization*

Shock or Surprise

“Every year, 9 million children die before their fifth birthday. A woman in sub-Saharan Africa has a one-in-thirty chance of dying while giving birth—in the developed world, the chance is one in 5,600. There are least twenty-five countries, most of them in sub-Saharan Africa, where the average person is expected to live no more than fifty-five years. In India alone, more than 50 million school-going children cannot read a very simple text.”

Abhijit V. Banerjee and Esther Duflo
Poor Economics: A Radical Rethinking of the Way to Fight Global Poverty

A Good Story

A 56-year old man was admitted to a teaching hospital for a routine medical procedure. Following the procedure, the doctors decided to put him on the blood-thinning medication, Warfarin. The next day, after a further assessment of the man's condition, the attending physician determined that the patient should be taken off Warfarin . . . The attending physician tells a resident (a junior doctor) to submit the order to *stop* the patient's blood-thinning medication. The resident picks up their smartphone, and begins entering the order to stop Warfarin. While entering the order, a text message from a friend with an invitation to a party . . .

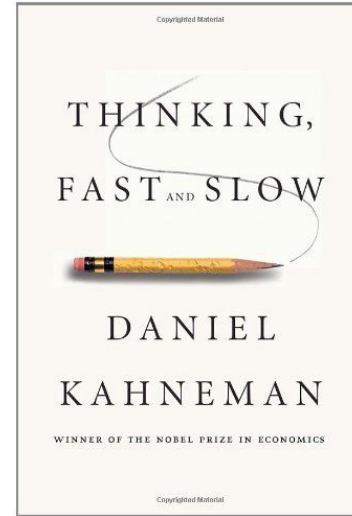
Opening paragraphs of Chapter Two

Distracted from Meaning: A Philosophy of Smartphones, Tiger Roholt

Closings

The Peak-End Rule

- Tell a Final Story
- Make a Call to Action or Awareness
- Close the Loop



Openings

“In the weeks before the English Department at Oberlin College was about to decide whether or not I would be granted tenure, I was haunted by dreams of running away—of disappearing—yes, even of dying. These dreams were not a response to fear that I would not be granted tenure. They were a response to the reality that I *would* be granted tenure. I was afraid that I *would* be **trapped** in the academy forever.”

bell hooks

Teaching to Transgress

Closings

“The academy is not paradise. But learning is a place where paradise can be created. The classroom, with all its limitations, remains a location of **possibility**. In that **field of possibility** we have the opportunity to labor for freedom, to demand of ourselves and our comrades, an **openness** of mind and heart that allows us to face reality even as we collectively imagine ways to move **beyond boundaries**, to transgress. This is education as the practice of **freedom**.”

bell hooks
Teaching to Transgress

Notes on Platform Tools

Principle

The purpose of all of your extra-book or essay activity is to build connections with your readers, who hope to continue learning you from you. Likewise, you hope to continue learning from their questions, expansions, and challenges. **Great learning experiences inspire readers to stay connected to their teachers.**

Social Media

- Amplify: Shine lights
- Admire: Express appreciation
- Question: Start conversations
- Inform: New resources and ideas
- Humanize: Teacher, learner, human

Beyond the *New Yorker*

- Local Newspapers and Websites
- Campus Publications
- *The Conversation*
- *Inside Higher Ed's* [Academic Minute](#)

Resources

