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## 2 Putting Beliefs into Practice

We know the basic characteristics of an effective writing assignment, but where do we begin the process of composing such assignments? Before we address any concerns we may have about logistics, form, style, or content, we need to begin with our pedagogical understanding of writers and how they write. We have to be aware of our beliefs as teachers of writing.

In November 2004, the Writing Study Group of the NCTE Executive Committee published the “NCTE Beliefs about the Teaching of Writing” (see the Appendix). This NCTE guideline outlines eleven beliefs about the way people develop writing abilities:

1. Everyone has the capacity to write, writing can be taught, and teachers can help students become better writers.
2. People learn to write by writing.
3. Writing is a process.
4. Writing is a tool for thinking.
5. Writing grows out of many different purposes.
6. Conventions of finished and edited texts are important to readers and therefore to writers.
7. Writing and reading are related.
8. Writing has a complex relationship to talk.
9. Literate practices are embedded in complicated social relationships.
10. Composing occurs in different modalities and technologies.
11. Assessment of writing involves complex, informed, human judgment.

By applying these principles to what we know about effective writing assignments, we can ensure that our writing assignments provide the resources students need to become better writers.

Each of the following points in the “NCTE Beliefs” contributes to a more complete understanding of the characteristics of effective writing assignments. If we take them one at a time, we can explore exactly how these beliefs influence each assignment we design.

*1. Everyone has the capacity to write, writing can be taught, and teachers can help students become better writers.*

Perhaps this belief seems obvious. I know I believe that writing can be taught—I am a writing teacher after all. I’ve taught writing for over twenty years, and I’ve seen student writers improve and learn new strategies and skills. If we are to teach writing, we need to believe that writing can be taught. The challenge for us as we design writing assignments is to find the most effective way to accomplish that goal. It’s not just a matter of believing that “teachers can help students become better writers.” We have to recognize *how* teachers help student writers improve and learn, and we then have to use that knowledge to shape the tasks and support systems that we develop.

The “NCTE Beliefs” tells us that “developing writers require support. This support can best come through carefully designed writing instruction oriented toward acquiring new strategies and skills. Certainly, writers can benefit from teachers who simply support and give them time to write. However, instruction matters.” As the “NCTE Beliefs” asserts, simply providing an assignment is not enough. The process of designing an effective writing assignment must include assembling the accompanying resources and crafting the instruction that will help students engage in the activity and develop as writers.

Even the best writing assignment can fail without this support: it’s a lesson I learned my first year as a teacher. I knew that writing assignments were important, and our teaching advisors had spent much time during our orientation urging us to design effective ones. I still felt fairly lost, however. I knew that I needed to learn more, so in the composition pedagogy course that I was taking, I focused on assignments and wrote my first graduate paper, “Designing Writing Assignments for a Composition Curriculum.” I gathered a variety of books—pedagogical books that explained how to teach writing and textbooks that included example after example of writing assignments and response prompts. I read extensively and did my best to learn as much as I could. I thought I was ready.

I redesigned the writing assignments for the next quarter I would teach. Gone were general assignments like “Write an analytical paper on symbolism in the novel.” I created much more complex prompts and instructions for students. What used to be “Write an analytical paper” became more thought provoking:

In the novel we’ve read, some of the characters are given positive, sympathetic portrayals. Others have negative, even

villainous portrayals. Still others may begin with negative qualities and gradually become more and more positive. The author gives us details, actions, and characteristics that help us figure out who is “good” and who is “bad.” It’s easy to know the difference in old westerns—good guys wear white hats; bad guys wear black hats. Think about the novel. How does the author indicate which characters are positive and which are negative?

With such new and improved writing assignments, I eagerly greeted the new term. But they weren’t enough.

In the language of the 2001 NAEP/National Writing Project study, the problem with this revised assignment—and all of the others—was that complicating its “content and scope” alone was not sufficient to improve students’ writing. To design an effective assignment, I also needed to include “organization and development.” The writing assignment needed to supply “scaffolding that supports students’ writing process.” My delivered curriculum needed to be more extensive and student-centered to provide the support that students needed.

Without that support, students struggled with my “improved” writing task. If anything, the struggles were worse—students were lost. They either resorted to summarizing their readings or wrote vague and general responses that didn’t fit the assignment. I quickly learned that you can’t improve students’ writing by just asking more complicated questions. Instead, students need writing assignments that provide support for the tasks that they are to complete.

Now when I use this assignment, I give students essentially the same writing prompt, but I provide more explanation before students even begin reading the novel. First, I ask the class to brainstorm characteristics of “good” and “bad” characters from a text they are all familiar with (e.g., a movie, a sitcom or cartoon, a commercial, a book that the class had read previously). As they are reading, I ask students to track relevant details in the novel using a customized bookmark or their reading journals. Their notes include page numbers, short quotations or paraphrased descriptions, and labels that indicate what the passage demonstrates. By the time students are ready to write a more formal paper, their writing process is already under way. As a result of these changes, students are more likely to make the kinds of analytical observations that I intended.

My experience that first year taught me that “instruction matters,” as the “NCTE Beliefs” says. When we design writing assignments, we have to do more than design a prompting question—much more. We



need to provide students with full support as they step through the writing task if we are to help them improve as writers.

## 2. *People learn to write by writing.*

I don't remember learning to write. I remember writing. I have piles of papers, beginning with high school essays on the Globe Theater and *The War of the Worlds* radio broadcast and stretching through the multiple drafts of my M.A. thesis and the various articles and software documentation that I have written since. I have piles of journals written over the course of my adult life. I have diaries in which I tracked the angst-filled highs and lows of my adolescence. I even have a hand-illustrated copy of *The Year the Easter Bunny Forgot*, apparently from third grade, given its incredibly awkward attempt at cursive handwriting.

I don't remember how I learned to string sentences together or use semicolons. Sure, I remember some specific errors and lessons. There was that first-year composition paper that I wrote when I thought that *secular* and *religious* were synonyms. Sadly, the lesson that I learned was to avoid the word *secular* completely. Even to write this paragraph, I had to look the word up to make sure I was using it correctly. I still have no confidence whatsoever in that word. I just learned not to use the word *secular*. I didn't learn anything about writing from that experience.

There have been specific moments when I suddenly realized that I knew how to write. On a recent day, after writing dozens of ReadWriteThink lesson plans and teaching ideas for NCTE's INBOX, I realized that my writing had changed. I'm sure it changed long before I ever noticed it, but that afternoon, it seemed obvious. I had finally become comfortable with a new voice: I knew how to write from an authoritative stance. Prior to that point, I felt as if I had been trying to weave together the positions expressed by a bunch of other people, connecting all the quotations gathered from my research on composition and language arts instruction in an expository dot-to-dot drawing.

At some point, I began writing from my own position and with my own voice. I was still including quotations from my research, but I was no longer simply connecting other people's ideas. I don't know when my writing actually changed, but I know when I realized it because I recorded the moment in a blog entry that day:

Can a writer's voice and style change in a matter of a few months, almost a year?

Maybe it's not that the voice has changed, but that I've finally found it. I reread something that I wrote in June or July. It's been sitting in its folder ever since. I just haven't had the chance or the

energy to write. But I pulled it out, and I felt almost compelled to grab a pen and mark out huge sections—sections that felt like a fake attempt at sounding like I knew what I was doing. It read to me like a sort of unnatural pasting together of varying sources.

I read it, and I suddenly knew that that wasn't my voice. My voice is different now. Much more straightforward, stronger. It feels very odd, and odder still that I don't know whether my voice changed—or maybe I had it all along and I just never heard it. Whatever the answer, maybe now I can get that manuscript written.

I didn't learn this new voice and style from any teacher or classes that I was taking. It didn't even come from a book I was reading. The change just happened over time, as I wrote more and more lesson plans and teacher resources. The time that I spent doing all that writing and re-writing actually changed the way that I write.

I learned to write by writing—and that's how students in most effective writing classrooms learn to write. Writing instruction needs to focus directly on writing, not on talking about writing or reading about writing. The delivered curriculum needs to include many opportunities for students to compose. Without such opportunities, the experienced curriculum that students construct short-circuits the writing process and thus does not adequately value writing.

The "NCTE Beliefs" explains it this way: "As is the case with many other things people do, getting better at writing requires doing it—a lot. This means actual writing, not merely listening to lectures about writing, doing grammar drills, or discussing readings. The more people write, the easier it gets and the more they are motivated to do it."

For a writing assignment, this means incorporating multiple opportunities for writing and encouraging students to write frequently. A writing assignment may ask students to write a descriptive essay, an informative report, or a persuasive letter. The best writing assignments, however, do not limit writing activities to a primary task. As we design writing assignments, we need to structure such options for writing. The "NCTE Beliefs about the Teaching of Writing" suggest that "writing instruction must include ample in-class and out-of-class opportunities for writing and should include writing for a variety of purposes and audiences."

Every assignment, regardless of the audience and purpose, can include writing that is meant for a range of purposes. For a persuasive letter to the editor, for example, I ask students to jot down characteristics of example letters in the newspaper, summarize the article they will



respond to, consult guiding questions when analyzing sample letters, use a graphic organizer to arrange ideas, compose rough drafts, refer to peer review questions when responding to another student's draft, and revise their own drafts.

Additionally, the writing does not have to be part of the formal structure of the assignment itself. Beyond writing specific pieces like those for the persuasive letters, for instance, I encourage students to write for themselves as they discover and explore their topics. I ask them to write directly to me about the topic, their progress, and any concerns or questions. I ask them to write to each other, writing questions for the peer readers who consider their drafts. I encourage students to add sticky note annotations to their drafts as well as to the books that they are reading. In short, I ask students to write quite often in the process of composing the final text for an assignment. By using such strategies, each writing assignment can, as the "NCTE Beliefs" suggests, "support students in the development of writing lives, habits, and preferences for life outside school."

### *3. Writing is a process.*

When I first began teaching, I brought in folders containing my own rough drafts, notes, handwritten revisions, and final pieces. I wanted students to see what writing looked like, so I put my own writing process on display. Today, there are more electronic files and fewer pieces of paper, but I still share my notes, drafts, and various annotations.

Writing assignments must accomplish this same goal—they have to show students what the writing process looks like, and they have to encourage students to discover their own writing process. The "NCTE Beliefs" suggests specifically how we can address the writing process in the classroom: "Whenever possible, teachers should attend to the process that students might follow to produce texts—and not only specify criteria for evaluating finished products, in form or content. Students should become comfortable with pre-writing techniques, multiple strategies for developing and organizing a message, a variety of strategies for revising and editing, and strategies for preparing products for public audiences and for deadlines. In explaining assignments, teachers should provide guidance and options for ways of going about it." To support process-based writing, then, assignments need to go beyond just providing a prompt for the finished product. They need to include support and structures that encourage students to engage fully in process-based writing, and they need to provide time for students to com-

plete multiple drafts. A fairly basic assignment might ask students to complete the following task:

Working with group members, use descriptive language to create a restaurant menu that gives your customers enough details to make an informed decision. Your group can choose the kind of restaurant, the features to include on the menu, and the specific menu items. Each group should turn in notes, rough drafts, and revisions, along with the final copy of the menu.

By asking students to turn in all drafts and to complete specific tasks, the prompt makes a good start at providing an effective assignment.

Even better is a writing assignment that encourages students to engage in the writing activity in ways that support the development of their own individual writing processes. Students should never be forced to follow a single process, because no two writers are the same. Every writer follows a different process, and that process can change because of the writer's audience, purpose, and situation. Writing assignments, then, should provide the support that will allow students to develop and refine their own processes. Consider this revised description of the assignment students will complete:

Working with group members, explore the genre of menus by analyzing existing menus from local restaurants. Pay attention to the words that the menus use and the ways that they have been put together to convince restaurant-goers to order the meals. After establishing the characteristics of the genre, your group will choose a restaurant and then create your own custom menus. Be sure to collect and save all the notes that you take as you explore examples so that you can return to them as you work.



In the revised assignment, students begin their writing process immediately by exploring the genre. Their research is part of the assignment and provides the structure for the first activities that they complete. At the same time, the process of gathering ideas isn't prescribed for the class. Students are given examples and encouraged to explore and make observations. The delivered curriculum makes room for the writing process in ways that allow students to develop as writers. Although structures are in place to help move them along, students are not given a step-by-step outline that would interrupt the natural development of their writing. As a result of these changes to the activity, when students

begin their drafts, they have already seen a range of options for their own writing.

A strong assignment continues to provide such support throughout the writing process. By providing planning sheets, offering suggestions for exploration, and encouraging peer discussion and feedback, a writing assignment can demonstrate various aspects of the writing process. At all times, however, students need to have choices to ensure that the activity never pushes them into a forced or formulaic writing process.

#### *4. Writing is a tool for thinking.*

I love “light bulb moments”—those moments when you’re working with students and you see their sudden understanding of a new idea or concept. Those are the moments I live for in the classroom—those moments when a student “gets it.”

Sometimes they happen in a writing conference. They can happen in class, as students talk about their papers in small groups or with the whole class. They can be revealed in a draft or journal entry. The thing about the light bulb moments in a writing class is that they often spring in one way or another from writing.

I remember in particular William’s light bulb moment. My first-year college composition class in spring 1993 focused on the ways that the writer’s perspective affects the meaning and language of a message. Students read pieces by Jane Tompkins, Harriet Jacobs, and Alice Walker, and we talked about how writing takes place in a social context. I asked the class to do some fairly complex and sophisticated thinking, and their writing showed that they were struggling a bit with the task.

One day in the middle of this course, William was slow to gather his belongings and leave, so I asked him if he had a question.

He stepped up to the desk and said, “I’ve been watching some of the TV about that thing in Waco. You seen it?” He was referring to the ATF raid on the Branch Davidian ranch near Waco, Texas, and the subsequent siege that was still under way there.

“I was writing about it in my journal,” he continued. “You see different reports and stuff on different channels.” I nodded, and he went on: “When they talk to the witnesses, they say different things about it and it has to do with what they care about. That’s just like those things we’ve been reading. That’s what you’re talking about, right?”

A light bulb moment! He didn’t know it, but William had had a light bulb moment as he wrote that journal entry and made the connections between what he had been reading and current events.



Many people believe that such ideas spring forth fully formed when people write, but writing teachers know that people frequently find and develop ideas *as they write*. When we ask students to freewrite, brainstorm, complete graphic organizers, or compose drafts, we are asking them to use writing as a tool for thinking—to discover, explore, and develop their ideas as they write. This time for thinking and exploring is perhaps the hardest piece of the delivered curriculum for students to recognize in their construction of the experienced curriculum.

The “NCTE Beliefs” explains that “in any writing classroom, some of the writing is for others and some of the writing is for the writer. Regardless of the age, ability, or experience of the writer, the use of writing to generate thought is still valuable; therefore, forms of writing such as personal narrative, journals, written reflections, observations, and writing-to-learn strategies are important.”

In William’s case, journal writing led him to make connections among the texts that he was reading and viewing. As we design writing assignments, we need to make room for such writing-to-learn components. Journals are a good start, but the assignments that we design can provide a range of explicit opportunities to use writing as a tool for thinking. “In any writing assignment,” the “NCTE Beliefs” tells us, “it must be assumed that part of the work of writers will involve generating and regenerating ideas prior to writing them.” In fact, asking students to reflect on their writing frequently makes them better aware of the writing habits and knowledge that they construct as they complete the assignments for a course.

Even a simple narrative assignment can demonstrate how this kind of writing and thinking can intertwine. Simply share a picture that tells a story and then encourage students to brainstorm words and ideas about the image before they write a story that gives background on the image or extends the story it tells. As they work on this task, students have the chance to think critically about their interpretations of the events in the image and to write about those ideas by brainstorming and freewriting. As they do this writing, they are analyzing the image and synthesizing the information that they find there. They are using writing as a tool for thinking. When they begin to shape their ideas into these detailed narratives, students have already been “generating and regenerating ideas prior to writing them” in their more formal papers.



##### 5. Writing grows out of many different purposes.

“But I got As last year, and now you’re telling me this is a D?”

How many times have I heard that question in writing conferences with students, and rarely could I help but feel sorry for these students, who usually pleaded later in our conversation, “But what do you want?”

The frustration students expressed in these conferences was probably not their fault—or, at worst, was their fault only because they have spent their time in the classroom attempting to do whatever they believed teachers wanted. The “NCTE Beliefs” explains: “Often, in school, students write only to prove that they did something they were asked to do, in order to get credit for it. Or, students are taught a single type of writing and are led to believe this type will suffice in all situations.”

When students write to prove what they know, whether it’s specific content or a writing form, they *are* paying attention to audience and purpose as they actively construct the experienced curriculum of the class. With all the materials and social situations that students analyze in the classroom, their ultimate goal is simply to construct a curriculum that will give them the best grade. For them, that boils down to a basic issue: What does the teacher want? Students unconsciously know that rhetorical needs drive the writing that they do when they pursue the answer to this question. They know, as the “NCTE Beliefs” states, that “writing grows out of many different purposes.” The email message that a student sends her two fathers saying that her favorite band is coming to town is different from the text message that same student sends to her best friends about the concert. The general information in the messages may be the same, but the language and the details of the two pieces of writing will probably be quite different.

In many academic writing situations, students demonstrate that they believe that the purpose is to get a good grade and the audience is the teacher. Those choices, although understandable, may not align with the purpose and audience that the teacher intended for the writing assignment. When students beg me to tell them what I want, they are showing that they understand how much audience shapes writing. They know that I am the reader who will grade their papers, so they want to know what I’ll be looking for when I read them. They are trying to achieve the purpose, as they see it, for the writing assignment.

To move students beyond this simplistic analysis of their writing situations, assignments need to focus on authentic communication and on a range of different kinds of writing for different audiences. In many classes, the basic kind of writing is determined by someone other than the student, who may be asked to compose an informative essay, a business letter, or an audio narrative. Because the purpose of the writing is

typically determined for them by the teacher, and not by their own needs for communication, students often have no purpose for their writing beyond pleasing the teacher in order to receive a good grade.

This predicament is addressed in the “NCTE Beliefs” directly: “Writers outside of school have many different purposes beyond demonstrating accountability, and they practice myriad types and genres. In order to make sure students are learning how writing differs when the purpose and the audience differ, it is important that teachers create opportunities for students to be in different kinds of writing situations, where the relationships and agendas are varied.”

Because they take these facts into account, the best writing assignments are interconnected and complex documents that invite students to create more than one kind of writing for more than one audience. Although a basic assignment can require that students write only drafts of an essay, a more effective assignment asks for a range of artifacts and audiences:

- journal writing to explore the topic
- an email message proposing the essay topic to the teacher
- a bulletin board message explaining the essay topic to a writing group
- a response on a bulletin board to peers’ topics
- essay drafts, some read by group members or the teacher
- comments to peer reviewers (questions about the current draft, etc.)
- peer review feedback to classmates
- a final draft reflections letter to the teacher

This collection of artifacts addresses multiple purposes and three or more audiences (classmates, teacher, and writer)—and all that without any attention to the audiences and purposes for the essay itself.

Further, the artifacts produced in response to an effective writing assignment differ from other composing that students have recently completed. Each writing assignment should be part of a larger curriculum that focuses on writing for a range of different audiences and purposes. In other words, designing effective writing assignments involves attention to the assignments that have come before and those that will come after. The entire series of writing assignments matters. Looking across the range of assignments, you should see different audiences and purposes. Naturally, assignments should not be arranged randomly—there should be connections among the activities as well. These ex-



amples show the range of purposes and audiences that a series might include, while also suggesting a thematic connection among the activities:

- a personal reflection on why a local place is important to the writer, to be shared with classmates
- a description of a memorable local place or a narrative that tells the story of a day in the place, written for someone who has never been there, perhaps in the form of a brochure for the local library
- a process essay that explains how to do something that takes place there, for someone who doesn't know how to do the thing
- a classification that outlines the ways that the local place is used by others, written to convince others to visit the location
- a letter to the editor that urges the public to take some action or position in relation to the local place (for instance, continued funding for a local park)

Notice that even in these brief assignment suggestions, the purpose and audience for the writing are clear. Inclusion of those details is the most basic element of an effective writing assignment. If we are to move students beyond thinking that all their writing in a course is simply for the teacher to grade, all in pursuit of a good final grade, we have to design assignments that make the purpose and audience for the writing precise and clear. We have to be explicit with students about what we really want: effective writing that pays attention to the audience and purpose we intend for the activity.

*6. Conventions of finished and edited texts are important to readers and therefore to writers.*

When I meet new people online, I hide my profession as long as possible to avoid seeing the comment "Oh, no, better watch my spelling!" in the chat window. Who among us hasn't confessed she was an English teacher and been greeted by such anxious responses? For a great many people, mention English teachers, and you bring up nightmares of grammar rules, spelling words, and incomprehensible punctuation marks.

I really don't sit around marking up every text with a red pen. While it's true that I understand the mysteries of the semicolon, I'm more likely to care about what something says than whether the words and punctuation are just right. Okay, I'll admit that I do chuckle when I see an advertisement for an upcoming "Clarence Sale" or a church bulletin announcement that reveals "The choir will sin at both services." But in

such cases, those of us with practice in reading the English language still know what the text is meant to say: we can see past the error to the actual intention. Readers still learning the English language, however, may be confused.

The difference between what a text says and what it means is a crucial one. When errors of spelling, punctuation, or grammar affect what a text actually says, the writer's purpose may not be accomplished. English teachers know this, but students often do not understand this concept. Further, when students do not fully understand the conventions in question, they can't see why their meaning is unclear. The challenge for teachers is balancing these issues of correctness with issues of content development and expression. As the "NCTE Beliefs" explains, "every teacher has to resolve a tension between writing as generating and shaping ideas and writing as demonstrating expected surface conventions. On the one hand, it is important for writing to be as correct as possible and for students to be able to produce correct texts. On the other hand, achieving correctness is only one set of things writers must be able to do; a correct text empty of ideas or unsuited to its audience or purpose is not a good piece of writing." Effective writing assignments address this tension by providing structures and support that focus on conventions without abandoning other aspects of writing. Simply telling students to attend to the conventions of spelling, punctuation, and grammar isn't enough. Students need to have details on what to look for and explanations of how to search for it embedded in the delivered assignment.

As I design writing assignments, I include structures that encourage attention to the conventional issues of writing. The timing of this support is crucial to its effectiveness however. I never ask students to focus on conventions early in the process and never to the exclusion of other writing issues. If issues of grammar, punctuation, and mechanics are raised too early, they can circumvent the writing processes and its development by shifting attention away from exploring and focusing on the message. Despite the significance of timing in providing support, dealing with conventions in the writing assignment itself can be relatively simple. When I create the schedule for a writing project, I ask for drafts at several points to encourage a fully developed writing process. As I review later drafts, I sketch out time to review grammar and punctuation, and I remind students to take time for spellchecking.

Scheduling support in this way ensures a basic level of attention to grammar, but students also need writing assignments to include information on specific conventions that are important to the assignment.

The “NCTE Beliefs” states, “Writers need an image in their minds of conventional grammar, spelling, and punctuation in order to compare what is already on the page to an ideal of correctness. They also need to be aware of stylistic options that will produce the most desirable impression on their readers. All of the dimensions of editing are motivated by a concern for an audience.”

In practice, this guideline means that attention to conventions has to be integrated in ways that flow with each writer’s process and has to be designed in ways that make connections to the writer’s purpose and audience clear. Say I’m designing a literary analysis assignment that asks students to explore the purpose and effectiveness of a specific symbol from a reading. In addition to talking about the literary element of symbolism and the other characteristics of the literary text, this writing assignment needs to talk about how conventions relating to quotations from the text will be important to meaning in students’ papers. After students have spent time identifying symbols and supporting evidence for their interpretations, I’d schedule class time to talk about how to format and punctuate the quotations they’ll use as evidence in their papers—and I’d schedule time for students to review their drafts for these issues. An effective writing assignment, in other words, not only asks students to pay attention to correct expression; it also allows time to talk about correct expression and answer questions that students have about the rules and guidelines for the texts that they are writing.



### 7. *Writing and reading are related.*

Before I figured out how to compose effective writing assignments, I knew the powerful connection between reading and writing—although, to be honest, I didn’t realize the important underlying connections between the practices that I had adopted. Early on, I found that when I provided students with models and talked about how those models worked, students wrote more effective essays. My favorite textbooks for writing classes were those that included student essays, which we discussed in detail in class. Naturally, I collected my own student examples over time and added them to the resources from the texts to use for group discussions.

Why was this practice so effective? As the “NCTE Beliefs” explains, “in order to write a particular kind of text, it helps if the writer has read that kind of text. In order to take on a particular style of language, the writer needs to have read that language, to have heard it in her mind, so that she can hear it again in order to compose it.” By sharing published and student essays, I intuitively recognized the facts be-

hind this belief: "Writing and reading are related. People who read a lot have a much easier time getting better at writing."

Whether they are used as background resources or as models for student writing, effective writing assignments should include readings. At times, those readings can provide the framing model for students' own writing. Nonfiction picture books, for instance, can provide structures that students can use as they complete research projects. In other circumstances, students might compose their own versions of a text that they have read, adapting the original published text to a new situation or topic. Parodies, for example, provide a great way for students to explore and analyze texts. Model readings need not be published texts, however. Student essays are also a vital resource when designing writing assignments. Some textbooks include these essays, but to add to my collection, I always ask students for permission to make copies of their texts for use with future students.

Simply providing these models is only the beginning, of course. Modeling is just as important as models: to help students learn strategies for developing the deeper reading and more sophisticated analysis that lead to stronger writing, the delivered curriculum must show them how people read and write essays. One of my most successful class sessions focused on a deep reading of song lyrics. Students were writing explications of a song of their choice (which I had approved, of course). I brought in the lyrics to "Old Friends/Bookends" by Paul Simon and Art Garfunkel, an older song that students were unlikely to choose as the focus for their own papers.

I passed out copies of the lyrics, played the song for the class, and then went through the lyrics carefully, line-by-line and word-by-word, demonstrating how I explicate a text. Students became involved in the discussion and added their own comments, observations, and connections to the lyrics. We covered the chalkboards with notes until we ran out of space. Reading the lyrics went beyond simply reading the text out loud. Reading, in this instance, involved modeling how to read a text.

With all this information gathered, together we created some possible outlines and key sentences for essays on the students' songs. When they left the class, the students had seen and participated in a deep reading activity that provided models for their own work. They had seen the connections between reading and writing in practice. To provide students with the support they need to do their best work, effective writing assignments develop these relationships as a natural part of the activity. Assignments do not always lend themselves to the kind of deep reading that I was able to demonstrate with the Simon and



Garfunkel lyrics, but there are always links between reading and writing, and effective assignments highlight and build on those connections.

*8. Writing has a complex relationship to talk.*

I talk about writing all the time—probably too much, if you ask my family. I can't help it. I spend a lot of time writing, and it's what I know best, so it's what I talk about. But I don't talk about writing simply because it's what I do. There have been numerous times when I worked out what I wanted to write by talking about the text with friends, family, and colleagues. There have been many important conversations that I first had on paper, writing down what I wanted to communicate before I spoke to the person involved. It's widely accepted that public speakers create notes before they present, but I've been known to even write notes before calling a company on the phone to talk about a billing problem or ask for customer support with a new piece of software or hardware. My handwritten notes are fundamentally important when I go to visit my doctor. Without writing out everything that I want to say to her, I'm not sure that I would ever remember to discuss all of the important aspects of my health care. In other words, I talk about writing and I write about talking because I know that it makes my communication stronger.

The "NCTE Beliefs" describes how these connections between writing and talking affect teaching: "As they grow, writers still need opportunities to talk about what they are writing about, to rehearse the language of their upcoming texts and run ideas by trusted colleagues before taking the risk of committing words to paper. After making a draft, it is often helpful for writers to discuss with peers what they have done, partly in order to get ideas from their peers, partly to see what they, the writers, say when they try to explain their thinking. Writing conferences, wherein student writers talk about their work with a teacher, who can make suggestions or re-orient what the writer is doing, are also very helpful uses of talk in the writing process."

Effective writing assignments include such relationships. If we ask students to think carefully, they find that they also have strong connections between their writing and their talking, but the challenge is that they may not recognize those connections themselves. I like to arrange assignments so that they include time for conferences early in the writing process. I ask students to talk to me about the writing they've done so far and, as they speak, I jot down what they say. When I ask them to then point out any places in their writing where they need help, I refer back to the notes that I've written. Typically, the challenge is easily ad-



dressed by reminding them of something that they mentioned in our discussion but students simply haven't yet connected what they know and talked about with what they have written in the text. In other words, in their experienced curriculum, they haven't constructed the connections between what they already know and what they are trying to accomplish.

In addition to peer discussion and writing conferences, oral description and drafting can prove to be useful prewriting techniques that get writers started on their drafts quickly. Narrative writing lends itself well to such a prewriting strategy because students are great natural oral storytellers. Simply ask students to tell their stories to one another in small groups before they begin drafting. Group members can take notes on the storyteller's tale, passing all of the notes along after the tale is told. When writing assignments are designed to include such activities, students' talk becomes a key strategy in their writing.



#### *9. Literate practices are embedded in complicated social relationships.*

All students are language experts. The lived curriculum that they bring to the classroom is wide-ranging: They know and have used language extensively before they come to the classroom. They may be struggling with academic language, content-area language, or even the English language itself—the delivered curriculum for their classes—but they have extensive and sophisticated language abilities. They are readers and writers. They communicate with friends, family, teachers, co-workers, classmates, and neighbors.

The “NCTE Beliefs” explains that “writing happens in the midst of a web of relationships.” This social web extends beyond writing to all communicative acts that students take. Reading a *Halo 3* cheat website, composing a Facebook profile, instant messaging with friends, speaking to the family around the kitchen table—all these literacy acts demonstrate students' understanding of sophisticated social relationships.

Students are clearly highly skilled language users, just not necessarily users of the kind of language that is expected for success in the classroom. Further, every student has different language experiences. Even if a group of students had the same language arts teacher, the members of that group would have varied personal language backgrounds that influenced their interactions with that teacher—and they would have extensive language experiences that had taken place outside that teacher's classroom. Every writer has a different social web that influences his or her literacy practices.

So many educators have mentioned that the “one size fits all” notion does not apply to teaching. In the case of language experiences, the adage is especially apt. As the “NCTE Beliefs” explains, “writers start in different places. It makes a difference what kind of language a writer spoke while growing up, and what kinds of language they are being asked to take on later in their experience. It makes a difference, too, the culture a writer comes from, the ways people use language in that culture and the degree to which that culture is privileged in the larger society. Important cultural differences are not only ethnic but also racial, economic, geographical and ideological.”

With the complicated patchwork of experiences that students bring to the classroom, it seems impossible for one activity to meet the needs of every student. Nonetheless, teachers must find assignments that can support writers who all begin at different starting places. A well-designed writing assignment can accomplish this goal, but it’s important to understand the difference between focusing the content of an assignment on different ways of using language and including support for students with a range of language experiences. I used the following assignment when I first began teaching, but now I realize that it fails to provide that kind of support:

Write a paper that traces the influence of a particular movie, song, book, person, or television show upon language use. Were there words or phrases related to the source you’ve chosen that were adopted by the general public? Who adopted them? How were they used? How long lasting was their influence? Why do you think they were adopted while words and phrases from other sources weren’t? And perhaps most important, what can you conclude about the ways that language use is influenced?

The problem with my old assignment is that although the content focuses on recognizing students as language experts, it does not provide the supporting resources that would help students with different backgrounds write as well as they can. The writing assignment talks about language knowledge in a general way. Language is the content only. The assignment doesn’t provide any way for students’ experiences to fit into their exploration of the issue. More problematically, the prompt does not provide scaffolding for students with different backgrounds, nor does it highlight the language requirements for the activity.

Compare that old prompt with the Pop Culture Dictionary Assignment in Figure 2.1, which also focuses on pop culture’s influence



on language but provides more support for students. From the first sentence, my new assignment encourages greater awareness of the social web of language that students bring to the classroom. The focus of the assignment is not a general discussion of culture's influence on language but a specific discussion of one cultural influence on students' own language.

Of course, every writing assignment cannot focus on the topic of language; we have to develop other ways that an effective writing assignment supports students' language knowledge. In the revised assignment, notice that students write in at least three different kinds of language: the academic language of dictionaries, the language of the popular culture text, and one of their own (likely more informal) languages.

For this particular assignment, the different varieties of language or dialect are included in the final artifact, but that need not be the case for an assignment to lead to effective writing. Students can write in an informal or home language in their journals as they begin prewriting, they can quote the languages of others in their research, they can use semiformal English in peer review with classmates, and they can use the academic language of the classroom in their final drafts. Since knowledge in one language transfers to another language, the inclusion in all assignments of opportunities for students to demonstrate their language abilities makes these assignments more effective and shows students that we value their range of language knowledge.

#### *10. Composing occurs in different modalities and technologies.*

Digital technologies have revolutionized much of the way that I write. I make starts and stops constantly as I draft. I try changes that I know I can easily undo without losing the original text. I can play around with white space, paragraphing, and headings until I get the best design.

In the past, writing was sometimes a one-shot deal involving erasable typing paper, Wite-Out, a very slow pace, and a lot of hoping. Often I composed complicated rough drafts with arrows, highlighted text, and many notes, but once I started typing, I was stuck. There was no way to change things without starting all over, so I learned to live with that first shot at a full draft.

Now I move passages around regularly, and I focus far more attention on the nonalphabetic aspects of my writing. If an illustration would help my point, I can easily add it to what I'm writing and get a polished result. When I share my draft with others, they can use software to comment on the exact passages they want to suggest changes

### Pop Culture Dictionary Assignment

Choose a particular pop culture text that has influenced your use of language. You might choose a movie, song, music video, book, celebrity, political movement, television show, or website.

Create five dictionary entries that define and provide details on words from the pop culture text. Your five words should be from one text or related texts. Any of the following would be acceptable choices:

- five phrases from a single television show but not necessarily all from the same episode
- five words used by a particular celebrity
- five words or phrases used in a series of movies (like the Harry Potter movies)
- five phrases used in a recent horror film
- five words used by a band in its latest videos

Each entry should include the word, its definition, an example of its use from the original pop culture text, an example of how you use the word in conversation, and basic etymology (the origin of the word's meaning).

Along with your entries, write a short introduction that explains what the original pop culture text is, who has been influenced by it, and how the words are most often used (e.g., in casual conversation with others who watch the television show). Your introduction can also discuss how widespread the influence of the text has been on language and predict how long the influence will last.

**Figure 2.1.** This revised assignment focuses on a single pop culture influence on students' own language.

for, thereby giving me more specific feedback than I ever got from peer readers when I was a student.

In the years that have passed since I first composed on a computer keyboard in 1980, I have come to truly understand the significance of the assertion in the "NCTE Beliefs" that as writers compose in different modalities and technologies, "'writing' comes to mean more than scratching words with pen and paper." Writing is placing words on screens and paper, recording words and sounds and images on video, arranging words and images and sounds in audio and video recordings, and creating links between all these means of expression.

Students still compose old-fashioned printouts and handwritten documents, but they can and do compose in many more formats—PowerPoint and KeyNote presentations, blogs, Web pages, email messages, audio recordings, videos, photographs, still images, oral presentations, text messages, spreadsheets, animations, hypertexts, podcasts. This constantly evolving list goes far beyond "scratching words with pen and paper," and, as a result, effective writing assignments must similarly extend the tasks that students are asked to complete. The "NCTE Beliefs" presents this goal directly:

Writing instruction must accommodate the explosion in technology from the world around us.

From the use of basic word processing to support drafting, revision, and editing to the use of hypertext and the infusion of visual components in writing, the definition of what writing instruction includes must evolve to embrace new requirements.

As we design writing assignments, then, we must recognize the roles that various modalities play in students' composing repertoire. For example, prewriting work can include drawings, conversations, written or typed notes, audio notes, scanned texts, and more. As part of a description of a place, students might take photos, film videos, or record the sounds of the place as part of their prewriting. Those various artifacts might become part of the description later or simply be inspiration and idea gathering for the final descriptive text.

Effective writing assignments allow for and even encourage such a range of composing opportunities for students, a range that supports the multiple intelligences that students bring to the classroom. Rather than propose a traditional analytical paper on *Romeo and Juliet*, for instance, an assignment might ask students to compose a PowerPoint or KeyNote presentation that communicates the same messages as a soliloquy in the play. Such an option allows students to use text, sounds, animations, film clips, and images in their work.

The problem with such an assignment, however, is that students without adequate technology access outside of the classroom are at a distinct disadvantage. In addition to allowing for a range of composing modalities, we must also pay attention to the composing tools available to students. The “NCTE Beliefs” reminds us that “many teachers and students do not, however, have adequate access to computing, recording, and video equipment to take advantage of the most up-to-date technologies. In many cases, teaching about the multi-modal nature of writing is best accomplished through varying the forms of writing with more ordinary implements.” Providing students with a range of options that includes “more ordinary implements” leads to stronger and more effective assignments. Further, by giving students the opportunity to choose the modality that best fits their abilities, a range of options also gives students the chance to choose the alternative that will lead to their best work.



Instead of asking every student to create a PowerPoint presentation on *Romeo and Juliet*, a more effective writing assignment, as shown in Modern-Day Interpretation Projects in Figure 2.2, provides a range of possible writing tasks that students can compose using whatever technology is available. Students without access to technology can write print-based newspaper articles. Instant messages, blog entries, and scripts can all be written with paper and pen. By providing options that let students choose the modality and tools in this way, effective writing assignments not only show an awareness of the wide range of ways that people compose but also provide support for the many ways of thinking and composing that students bring to the classroom.

*11. Assessment of writing involves complex, informed, human judgment.*

“I got a Godzilla!” one of my students bragged from the back of the classroom. And with that exclamation, one of the most successful grading techniques I’ve ever used was under way.

It really all began as a sort of joke. I was using a behavioral grading method, as described in Glenn J. Broadhead and Richard C. Freed’s *The Variables of Composition: Process and Product in a Business Setting*, to teach business writing. I assigned only pass/fail grades to the work, and students had to compile a certain number of passes to get various grades. I had read an article arguing that in the business world you don’t get As and Bs: you either get a pass and send the piece out or get told to redo the work. Pedagogically, the system was attractive because it allowed students to learn from their work on the various drafts, rather than punishing them for every misstep.

### Modern-Day Interpretation Projects

**1. Headline News Story.** Choose a modern-day event that mirrors an event that occurred in the text. Create a headline news Web page and two or three related links based on the event for a Web-based news site. To get an idea of length, format, and the kinds of links typically included in such stories, visit news sites on the Web.

**2. Instant Messages or Text Messages.** Rewrite a dialogue between two characters from the text in modern-day format as if it took place online through instant messages or on cell phones or another tool using text messages.

**3. Blog.** Rewrite a monologue from the text (e.g., the speech of one person) as a blog entry or a series of blog entries. Include appropriate links to other Web pages and comments that other characters from the text might leave on the blog entries.

**4. Podcast.** Rewrite a monologue or dialogue from the text as a podcast (a self-published syndicated “radio show”). Record your project as an audio file or create the transcript of the show that you might post online with the audio file. Be sure to include details on background sounds and music if you write a transcript.

**5. What If?** Find a scene in the text that you believe would have been radically different given the existence of a certain piece of advanced high-tech equipment. Name the item and describe how and why the scene would have been different and how it would have affected the outcome of the play.

**6. Digital Artifacts.** Imagine that you find a portable disk next to the computer of one of the characters from the text. It might be a floppy disk, Zip disk, USB keychain disk, or another device. This storage disk contains personal documents—letters, “to do” lists, data, and poems written by the character for his or her eyes only. Decide on four or five documents, recreate them, invent file names for each, and create a (fake) printout of the disk directory. Put all these together in a packet about the character.

**7. Playlist.** Choose one of the characters from the text and create a playlist that that character would have on his or her iPod or MP3 player. Invent the name for the playlist and create a list of the names of the songs, the artists, the albums the songs came from, and other relevant details in your word processor. Alternately, if you have the resources available, you can burn a CD of the character’s playlist and create a CD label with the appropriate details.

**8. Reality TV Show.** Imagine that the characters from the text are part of a reality TV show. Rewrite a scene from the text as it would have been caught from the surveillance cameras of the show. Film your scene using a video camera or write a transcript of it (including details on background sounds, setting, and props).

**9. Technology Product Endorsement.** Have a character in the text endorse a technology product—design a letter or short narrative in which the character tells readers why they should purchase or support the product.

**10. PowerPoint Presentation.** Rewrite a monologue from the text as a PowerPoint presentation. Imagine that the character is presenting the information to a modern audience using text, images, and other features available in PowerPoint (or another computer-based presentation tool). Create the PowerPoint presentation that the character would use.

**Figure 2.2.** This range of tasks gives students options for using technology.

Providing feedback in this system was a little challenging though. The article had suggested using checkmarks on students' work. It's not that I usually mistrust students, but I realized that it would be easy for an unethical student to fake a checkmark or other such handwritten mark on a paper. My solution was to use some stamps and an ink pad to indicate the pass or fail mark on the paper. As part of my explanation of the system to the class, I showed them the stamp that I would use on their passing work: a fairly generic red happy face stamp that I'd picked up at the office supply store. I didn't add any special mark to students' work that did not meet the requirements. Instead, unless the paper had been marked with the specified red happy face, it wasn't acceptable.

Simply because I had a red Godzilla stamp with me when I was describing the system, I told students that if they made sloppy mistakes, such as failing to spellcheck, they'd get the Godzilla stamped on their papers. I really intended that to be the end of it, but over the first days of the course, students were curious about the mysterious Godzilla stamp. Some students had even taken to pointing out errors that they thought were probably worthy of the Godzilla, but they explained, "She's just being nice" as they compared drafts and worked on peer review together.

Finally, I gave in. One evening as I was grading, I ran across a basic error in the paper of one student who had been particularly insistent in questioning when the Godzilla would appear. I stamped his paper with the Godzilla, went on to the next one, and didn't think anything of it until his enthusiastic response in class that next morning.

In short time, the Godzilla stamp became the highlight of each class. When I returned papers, students eagerly searched out the Godzillas and discussed in their writing groups what they'd gotten wrong in the editing process. In conferences with me, students would pull out Godzilla-stamped texts and explain their errors to me in the course of discussing other, deeper issues related to their work. When someone who frequently found Godzillas on every paper got a Godzilla-free paper, there was much pride—not just from the writer but from the entire writing group. It was the one and only time in my teaching career that giving negative feedback was taken as positive support rather than as criticism. I'm not sure I could ever repeat the way that that particular class embraced the Godzilla stamp, but it was fun while it lasted.

The reaction to that stamp helped teach me the importance of formative feedback. When students are actively involved in ongoing assessment, during peer review and in writing groups as well as in stu-



dent-teacher conferences, assessment criteria become more concrete for them. Prior to that course, the feedback that I gave students included commenting on rough drafts and discussing work in student-teacher conferences, but never before had I spent so much time on ongoing feedback as students were in the process of writing. During all of this feedback and interaction, the students and I constructed an experienced curriculum in which error was okay because it was a legitimate learning experience. Students could make errors without negative consequences and with the understanding that they would have the chance to improve their work. It was a labor-intensive course for me, but it was clear that when students had more continuing feedback, they worked together as members of writing groups more successfully and they wrote more effectively.

The “NCTE Beliefs” identifies two kinds of assessment that teachers of writing should use with writers: “Instructors must recognize the difference between formative and summative evaluation and be prepared to evaluate students’ writing from both perspectives. By formative evaluation here, we mean provisional, ongoing, in-process judgments about what students know and what to teach next. By summative evaluation, we mean final judgments about the quality of student work. Teachers of writing must also be able to recognize the developmental aspects of writing ability and devise appropriate lessons for students at all levels of expertise.” Effective writing assignments include details on the feedback students will receive: both on the ongoing feedback that will be available and on the final criteria used to judge the finished piece. The assignments I gave students in that business writing class included both aspects. Students had summative assessment criteria for their work in the form of specific checklists of the requirements and expectations for each kind of writing that they were to complete. They also had a written description of the behavioral grading system that described the formative assessment they would receive on every piece of writing they wrote for the class. By including these assessment materials, effective writing assignments engage students in the assessment process. Students know what the criteria are for their work and are better able to work toward fulfilling them.

In addition to formative and summative assessment, effective writing assignments include opportunities for self-assessment and reflection for students. The “NCTE Beliefs” asserts that such reflection activities “contribute to a writer’s development and ability to move among genres, media, and rhetorical situations.” I typically use draft letters to the teacher to identify students’ intentions and the questions



they have about the drafts they are turning in. I ask students to include comments on the parts of their work that they are satisfied with, those that they are still working on, and those that they need help with. Their comments help me focus the feedback I provide so that I address the issues that students are most concerned about. Whether I'm commenting on an early draft or a final version of students' work, these draft letters are a valuable part of the assessment process because they communicate students' understandings about the work as well as their recognition of which parts of the assignment they have completed successfully and which they believe could be improved.

### **How Beliefs Shape Practice**

If I've written an effective writing assignment, I know that it includes all eleven of the beliefs covered in this chapter. Indeed, one thing that makes an assignment effective is the way that these pedagogical beliefs shape the design of the prompt, activities, and resources that combine to create the assignment. As I compose a writing assignment, these pedagogical beliefs influence the activities and focus of the project, the supporting resources I include, and how I schedule the different activities that students complete as they work on it.

Once we understand these underlying pedagogical beliefs and how they affect students' success as writers, the task of designing an effective writing assignment becomes easier. In an effective assignment, decisions about logistics, form, style, and content all depend upon these beliefs and how they apply to the students we teach. When we begin to design a writing assignment, we each may follow a different composing process; if we want to design an effective writing assignment, we always rely on what we know about how people learn to write.