



They *Can* Take It With Them:

FUELING OUR FIRES TO TEACH FOR WRITING TRANSFER

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Abstract: Composition researchers have become increasingly concerned with the issue of knowledge transfer: the use of knowledge and skills learned in one setting to complete tasks in a different setting. In terms of writing-related knowledge transfer, research suggests that rigid rules and formulas for writing do not transfer as successfully as flexible strategies. Teachers in Texas confront a dilemma in that STAAR writing tests seem to encourage formulaic writing that may be effective for the exam but that is unlikely to help students succeed on writing tasks they encounter in later educational stages and beyond. One technique that has been found to increase transfer is to teach students how to analyze a rhetorical situation and adapt their writing accordingly. The authors propose an approach to STAAR test preparation that combines knowledge of the rhetorical situation with practical advice for how to pass the test. This approach promises to help teachers meet their obligations to prepare students for STAAR tests without abandoning their commitment to rhetorical instruction.

Keywords: knowledge transfer, rhetorical situation, STAAR test, rhetoric, composition

When Donald Graves (2001) studied “energy drain” among teachers nearly 20 years ago, he identified teachers’ belief that their work makes no difference as a primary culprit. Graves found that when “teacher judgment is continually bypassed by legislatures, state department of education, and local administrators” in favor of curricula and assessments “that have little to do with lasting learning,” the result is “significant energy loss” (p. 3). For those of us who teach writing, nothing drains our energy more than realizing at the end of a long school year that our students are writing no better than they were at the beginning. Even if our students have improved at formulaic writing tasks, we wonder if what they have learned will be useful in later grades, or in college, or in their lives outside school.

For English language arts (ELA) teachers in Texas, no tool could be better designed to sap our energy to teach writing than the State of Texas Assessments of Academic Readiness (STAAR) writing tests, administered at the end of grades four and seven and English I and II. We neither develop nor score these writing tests, despite the unequivocal statement by the National Council of Teachers of English (NCTE) (2014) that “best assessment practice is undertaken in response to local goals, not external pressure” (“Guiding Principles for Assessment,” 1B). Far worse, most of us are deeply skeptical of writing exams that ask students to answer multiple-choice questions about how they would revise or edit a piece of writing they did not produce. We are hardly more reassured by a composition section that allows students 26 lines with the not-so-

subtle directive that “STUDENTS MAY NOT WRITE OUTSIDE THE BOX” (Texas Education Agency, 2012).

The STAAR represents the highest of high-stakes testing of our students’ writing, and these tests may not be going away anytime soon.¹ Obviously we cannot ignore them. We have an obligation to prepare our students to succeed on them, but is it possible to prepare students for the STAAR writing tests without abandoning best practices for the teaching of writing? We believe it is. In this article, we describe an approach to test preparation that is enveloped in a broader pedagogy focused on writing-related knowledge transfer. Our goal is to help teachers transform the teaching of writing from an “energy taking” to an “energy giving” (Graves, 2001, p. 4) activity by explaining how we can prepare students for STAAR writing tests while at the same time equipping them with writing-related knowledge, skills, and habits that will transfer to more meaningful settings.

Writing-Related Knowledge Transfer

Educational researchers have studied the issue of knowledge transfer for decades (Perkins & Salomon, 1992). The persistence of this concern has much to do with the structure of formal education itself, which is designed in such a way that poses problems for the transfer of knowledge. Unlike apprenticeship or internship models, in which learners receive on-the-job training in settings similar to those for which they are being trained, formal education operates as a series of discrete levels far removed from the settings to which knowledge is supposed to transfer. Students in one grade learn in

isolation from the next grade, students at one educational stage learn in isolation from the next stage, and formal education itself operates independently of the professional world. In such a system, each educational level runs the risk of becoming self-contained: knowledge and skills acquired and used to complete tasks at one level may not be usable at the next level. This is one reason we pay so much attention to vertical alignment and college and career readiness standards.

In more recent years, composition researchers have begun to study knowledge transfer as it pertains to writing (Beaufort, 2007, 2012; Driscoll & Wells, 2012; Nowacek, 2011; Robertson, Taczak, & Yancey, 2012). In particular, researchers have examined the problem of writing-related knowledge transfer through the lens of “well-structured” and “ill-structured” problems (King & Kitchener, 1994; Wardle, 2013). Put simply, a well-structured problem has a single right answer. For example, the answer to the problem $2 + 2$ is 4, has always been 4, and will always be 4. Whether one is a kindergartener or a nuclear physicist, when confronted with the problem $2 + 2$, the correct answer is 4. In contrast, ill-structured problems have no single right answer and may be solved effectively in different ways. Writing problems are almost always ill-structured. If a math colleague gives a test on which all students score 100%, we can assume that all students came up with the same answers to the same problems. In contrast, when we assign an essay, even if all our students earn 100%, no two essays will be the same.

Well-structured problems are solved by applying rigid rules, algorithms, formulas, and principles that are valid in every context. Once learned, these operations can be used to solve problems of the same type in different situations. As a result, procedures for solving well-structured problems tend to transfer well. For example, once students learn the principles of addition and subtraction, they can successfully add and subtract numbers in any number of contexts, including in more advanced mathematics classes. Ill-structured problems, on the other hand, can be solved only by applying flexible strategies that are adapted to the constraints of particular situations. A strategy that works when solving one ill-structured

¹In 2015 the Texas Legislature passed House Bill 1164 establishing the Texas Writing Pilot Program, which is intended to develop a more authentic method of writing assessment than testing alone. Students in the program submit a writing portfolio that includes two timed writing samples and two writing process samples completed in the context of regular classroom instruction. The program is being piloted in three Educational Service Centers during school years 2016-17 and 2017-18. For more information, see [https://tea.texas.gov/Student_Testing_and_Accountability/Testing/State_of_Texas_Assessments_of_Academic_Readiness_\(STAAR\)/The_Texas_Writing_Pilot_Program/](https://tea.texas.gov/Student_Testing_and_Accountability/Testing/State_of_Texas_Assessments_of_Academic_Readiness_(STAAR)/The_Texas_Writing_Pilot_Program/) (TEA, n.d.).



problem may not work with a similar problem in a different context. Consequently, knowledge transfer in fields that deal with ill-structured problems tends to be relatively low. Consider, for example, the field of teaching. A joke that elicits laughter in one class may produce blank stares in the next, and an example that unlocks a tricky concept for one group of students may simply confuse a different group. The reason we must always be on our toes as ELA teachers is that we lack the luxury of formulas that always work.

Teaching for transfer in subject areas that deal with ill-structured problems is always difficult, but it becomes nearly impossible when we teach students to treat ill-structured problems *as if they were well-structured*. The temptation to do so is great because, after all, it is far simpler to teach students an unchanging set of rules and procedures than it is to teach them flexible strategies that must always be adapted to the particularities of a given problem. For example, ELA teachers often find that student writers use too many first-person pronouns or use first-person pronouns inappropriately. The simplest solution to this problem is to treat the problem as if it were well-structured and program students with a rule: never use first-person pronouns in formal academic writing. This solution may work in our class, at least in the sense that students no longer misuse first-person pronouns, but it poses problems for transfer. Students who have internalized the prohibition of first-person pronouns may transfer this rule to academic writing situations, especially in college, where it no longer applies. As Graff and Birkenstein (2018) have pointed out, sophisticated college writing tasks often ask students to differentiate their own positions from those of others, and this maneuver is made unnecessarily difficult when students believe they must avoid first-person pronouns at all costs (p. xxi). Even more problematic, teaching students to apply rigid rules to ill-structured problems like writing tasks fundamentally distorts the nature of these problems. What are students to think when they have been taught by high-school teachers to avoid first-person pronouns in academic writing, only to find that their college composition teachers encourage the use of first-person pronouns? Because these students have been trained to think of writing as a well-structured problem that operates according to rules, the most logical conclusion is that one group of teachers must be right and the other group must be wrong. What students have not learned is that there *are* no rules.

Instead of rules, what students need are flexible strategies that they can adapt to the specific demands of different writing situations. One such strategy, recommended by many transfer researchers (Beaufort, 2012; Boone, Chaney, Compton, Donahue, & Gocsik, 2012; Wardle, 2007, 2012), is to begin each writing task by analyzing the rhetorical situation. The rhetorical situation is often represented as a triangle with different components (author, subject, and audience) at each point, the idea being that the different points modify and contextualize the text inside. The first component, author, refers to the version of the writer established in the text, as well as the writer's purpose. The second component, subject, refers to both the subject-matter knowledge and the genre knowledge that influence the content and form of the text. The third component, audience, concerns the reader or readers whom the text attempts to influence. The rhetorical situation is a theoretical construct intended to conceptualize the context of any act of communication. In other words, writers inhabit a rhetorical situation any time they communicate, regardless of whether they realize it. By developing metacognitive awareness of the rhetorical situation, writers can consciously adapt their texts to meet the demands of a given writing task.

To demonstrate how this awareness works and to illustrate the flexibility built into the concept of the rhetorical situation, consider the contrast between a STAAR writing task and its equivalent in real-world situations. Last year's writing prompt for English II asked students to "write an essay stating your opinion on whether a person can choose to be happy" and gave them a few directives to follow (TEA, 2017, p. 2). Presented in this way, with little information about the rhetorical situation, the problem seems well structured, as if there were a "right" way to write the essay. When we consider real-world situations in which students might write on this topic, however, things get more complicated. Let us say, for example, that a student is writing to a friend who is unhappy. In this rhetorical situation, it would be perfectly appropriate for the student to write in an informal style that draws heavily on personal experience and addresses the reader directly. If instead the student were writing on this topic for a research paper in school, he or she would want to establish a more detached persona, adopt a more formal style, cite academic research, and address a broad readership by adhering to certain genre conventions. If the student were writing a testimony to be delivered in church, he or she might draw on personal experience in the church, cite scripture, adapt the text for oral delivery, and appeal directly to the congregation's values and faith tradition. The point is that none of these approaches is any more right or wrong than another, and in fact the "rules" that apply to one situation would be entirely out of place in a different situation.

There is nothing particularly new or revolutionary about the rhetorical situation and its central place in writing instruction. In fact, every professional association concerned with ELA instruction has issued a statement emphasizing the importance of rhetorical awareness for college and career readiness. For example, NCTE (2016) affirms that "it is important that students have experiences within school that teach them how writing differs with purpose, audience, and other elements of the situation" (para 3). In another statement, NCTE joins the Council of Writing Program Administrators and the National Writing Project (2011) in defining "rhetorical knowledge" as the "ability to analyze and act on understandings of audiences, purposes, and contexts" and asserts that such knowledge "is the basis of good writing" (p. 6). Number one on the list of "guiding principles of sound writing instruction," published by the Conference on College Composition and Communication (2015), is emphasis on the "rhetorical nature of writing" ("Executive Summary"). In Texas, the Texas Essential Knowledge and Skills (TEA, 2017b) stipulate that by the end of third grade students should be planning a composition by "selecting a genre for a particular topic, purpose, and audience using a range of strategies" (see Composition standard 11A). Finally, the first performance expectation in the writing section of the Texas College and Career Readiness Standards (Texas Higher Education Coordinating Board, 2009) states that students should be able to "determine effective approaches, forms, and rhetorical techniques that demonstrate understanding of the writer's purpose and audience" (p. 3).

With such a field consensus, which includes ELA standards in Texas, we might expect that students in Texas learn to analyze and act on the rhetorical situation from third grade on. In our experience, however, students in high school and college remain more likely to see writing tasks as well-structured problems to which rigid rules apply. Given most schools' emphasis on STAAR (and Texas Assessment of Knowledge and Skills and Texas Assessment of Academic Readiness before it) and the fact that STAAR writing tests are presented as well-structured problems, we suspect that the test contributes to students' lack of rhetorical awareness. Later

we will suggest an approach to STAAR preparation that actually reinforces rhetorical knowledge, but first we want to share a few classroom experiences that typify of our students' thinking about writing. These anecdotes reveal not only that our students think of writing as a rule-bound activity but also that their thinking is deeply ingrained. By the time students reach high school, the writing rules they have internalized are extremely difficult to dislodge, even when a teacher states explicitly that rules no longer apply.

Student Stories

Ashley

For the final project in English II, I asked students to compile a number of pieces written in different genres and to select a specific audience to whom they would send their work. Ashley (all names are pseudonyms) quickly decided on a topic. She wanted to write a letter, some poems, and a story about her grandmother. Her first piece would be a letter to her grandmother expressing her gratitude for their close relationship. Ashley also planned to include four poems written in free verse. Finally, Ashley would conclude with a memoir of a specific event in her relationship with her grandmother. When the project came due, Ashley was proud of her work, and she gushed about how much her grandmother would love reading her compositions. When I reviewed her materials, however, I noticed that every piece adhered to MLA guidelines for research papers. The letter, for example, contained no salutation but did have a properly formatted header, page numbers, in-text citations, and a list of works cited. When I asked Ashley whether this is how she would normally format something written to her grandmother, she admitted she had misgivings but explained, "I thought you might count off if things weren't in MLA style. And I figured you wouldn't count off if I used MLA, even if I wasn't supposed to. So I played it safe."

Lauren

Early in English II, I showed students a short video on academic dishonesty in high school and asked them to write a persuasive essay responding to the following statement from the video: "School is an institution that silently encourages cheating." The prompt specified that students should select an audience for their essays and adjust the form and content accordingly. Lauren was excited about this assignment. She felt that the school's single-minded emphasis on quantitative performance measures encouraged students to do anything, including cheating, to earn high grades and test scores. She proposed to write a letter to the principal in the hope that she might effect some change in school culture. When I collected drafts, I noticed that Lauren's essay was written on the 26-line page used for STAAR writing tests. I pulled her aside and asked her why she decided to write her essay on this paper, and she replied, "Aren't all essays written on this type of paper? It was supposed to be 26 lines, right?" It turned out that in English I Lauren had been required to write every essay, regardless of the topic or genre, in the 26-line box. When I informed her that she was freed from that constraint, she was relieved and also excited by the possibility of writing an essay longer than 26 lines. She was also miffed: "I was really annoyed that you hadn't provided us with the required paper. I wasted 30 minutes that I could have spent on my essay trying to find a lined text box on the internet. And when I finally found one, I thought this would give me a leg up on the rest of the class."

Paul

In another English II class, the first assignment was one that past students had loved. I call it "What's Your Story?," and it allows

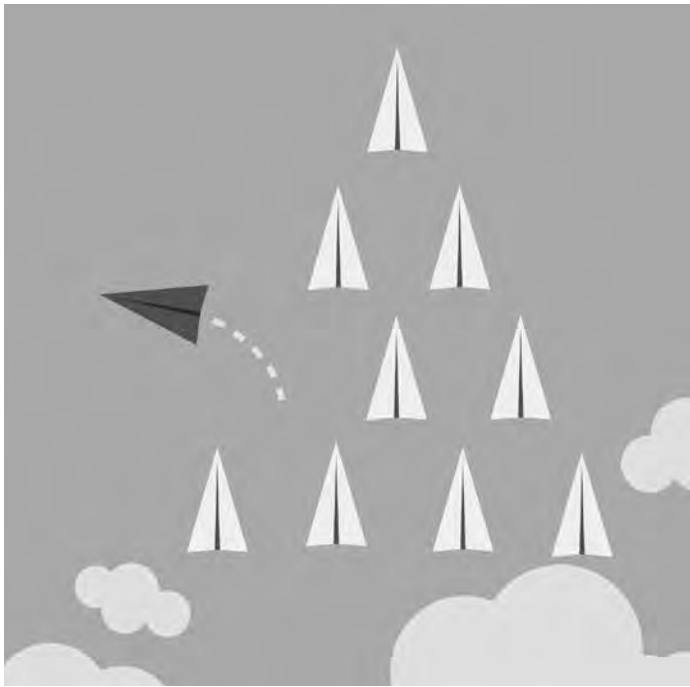
students to tell their life story in whatever form they choose. Paul was particularly excited to start this assignment. Involved in theatre since he was eight, Paul decided to write about his life using the structure of a drama. He showed me a preliminary cast of characters, stage directions, costume descriptions, and set props. He intended for this to be a production that could be performed for an audience of peers. When I received the first draft of Paul's "drama," it was a five-paragraph essay. I asked Paul why he formatted the piece this way, and he replied, "This is an essay, and essays should have five paragraphs."

These anecdotes illustrate what happens when students internalize a script for academic writing that they follow slavishly, even when the script is inappropriate for new rhetorical situations. Many teachers and students feel that this type of scripted performance is what works on STAAR writing tests and thus are reluctant to deviate from it. In the next section we describe an alternative approach to STAAR test preparation that accords with a broad commitment to teaching students how to size up and respond to rhetorical situations.

STAAR and the Rhetorical Situation

We mentioned earlier that STAAR writing tests are presented as well-structured problems. Another way to say this is that the tests appear to be "arhetorical"—writing tasks for which there is no rhetorical situation. For example, the "writer" component of the rhetorical situation is obscured because the test is required and the topic assigned. In such a setting, it seems unlikely that any student-author would possess an authentic, self-generated purpose for writing. Rather, the only purpose for writing is to pass the test, an all-too-common situation in which "students write only to prove that they did something they were asked to do, in order to get credit for it" (NCTE, 2016, para 3). In terms of the "subject," STAAR writing tests do not require any subject-area knowledge, so the prompts must necessarily be highly general, requiring only such knowledge as would come to mind more or less automatically for all students. Perhaps most significant, STAAR writing tests make no mention of the "audience" component of the rhetorical situation, which makes it difficult to conceive of the task as rhetorical at all. Students may see the test as a test rather than as an invitation to communicate with an audience, and consequently they may attempt to produce the "right" answer in textual form.

Given this test format, it is tempting to teach students to meet the test on its own terms, treat it like a well-structured problem, and respond with a formula that approximates a "right" answer. Indeed, many teachers do precisely this, often with a high rate of success. The problem is that when we teach students to activate a formula designed specifically for the STAAR test, we are *not* teaching them the rhetorical approach to writing that is required by the TEKS. In fact, as our student stories demonstrate, teaching students to write according to a formula may do more than simply neglect a rhetorical approach—it may actively work against it. Students who are taught to write according to a formula for the purposes of passing a test may come to believe that all writing works this way, that all writing must follow a rigid set of rules, that all writing tasks are well-structured problems. Such beliefs impede the successful transfer of writing-related knowledge. In subsequent grades or educational stages, students may resort to a formula that is not appropriate for new writing tasks. Or students may realize that a formula no longer applies, but they lack flexible, metacognitive strategies that allow them to repurpose their knowledge for new writing tasks.



If, on the other hand, students have learned to analyze the rhetorical situation of any given writing task and adjust their writing accordingly, they should be able to apply this same strategy to STAAR writing tests. To be sure, the rhetorical situation of these tests is well concealed, so students need a teacher's guidance. With a teacher's help, students can grasp easily enough that their written responses are read and scored by human beings and thus are genuine acts of communication with a clear persuasive intent: to convince STAAR raters that the performance is satisfactory. Furthermore, TEA provides teachers and students with the information necessary to successfully navigate the rhetorical situation of each STAAR writing test. Specifically, the "Writing Rubric" for each test provides clear assessment criteria, and the "Scoring Guide" provides numerous "anchor papers" that exemplify different scoring levels.

To illustrate how students and teachers might go about analyzing the rhetorical situation of a STAAR writing test, let us return to the 2017 STAAR writing test for English II. When we examine the rubric included in the "Persuasive Writing Scoring Guide" (TEA, 2017a), an image of the "author" component of the rhetorical situation begins to emerge. For example, the ideal student-writer follows instructions closely, choosing an organizational structure that "is clearly appropriate to the purpose and responsive to the specific demands of the prompt." This writer is not wishy-washy but instead "establishes a clear position." Once settled on a direction, this writer stays on task, producing a text in which "all ideas are strongly related to the position and are focused on the issue specified in the prompt." In terms of the "subject" component of the rhetorical situation, student-writers are limited in how extensively they can prepare because the topic of the prompt is not revealed until the test is administered. Still, although the specific *topic* is unknown, the *type* of knowledge required remains consistent in each iteration of the exam, as an "accomplished writing performance" draws on examples that are "specific and well chosen." The high-scoring samples included in the guide make clear that student-writers must draw extensively from their personal store of experiences, observations, knowledge, and reading in order to find vivid examples that will help them make their case. Also, students must know how to make an effective argument, as essays are judged on the quality of "the reasons and evidence the writer

uses to support the position." Finally, students must demonstrate their knowledge of prose conventions in their use of "transitions and strong sentence-to-sentence connections" and their "command of sentence boundaries and spelling, capitalization, punctuation, grammar, and usage conventions."

The "audience" component of the rhetorical situation of STAAR writing tests is entirely absent from the prompts, so teachers must look beyond the curriculum to help students develop an understanding of their audience. A particularly valuable resource is Chapter 2 of TEA's *Technical Digest* (2016), which details the procedure by which students' written responses are scored. For example, students should understand that they are writing for two people who have completed extensive training to ensure that they score compositions reliably according to the assessment criteria listed in the "Writing Rubric." In a sense, readers are living, breathing embodiments of the rubric, far more predictable in their responses than any real-world audience. These readers score compositions independently and must reach exact agreement; otherwise, the composition is routed to a third reader for additional review. The "Scoring Guide" for each STAAR writing test provides teachers and students with materials similar to those used to train readers, as it includes the rubric, "anchor papers" for each scoring level, and extended written commentary for each paper that explains how it exemplifies its scoring level. With such information available for study, there is no reason for students to enter the testing situation without a clear sense of their intended audience and an understanding of how best to appeal to that audience.

This approach to test preparation may seem just as cynical as any other type of "teaching to the test," so we should clarify how it is different. The two main criticisms of teaching to the test are that it limits the curriculum to the knowledge and skills that will be tested and that it relies on repetitive drills rather than a comprehensive understanding of the material. Teaching students rhetorical awareness does neither. The TEKS stipulate that from third grade on, all writing instruction should fit under the umbrella of rhetorical knowledge, with students focusing their writing on "a particular topic, purpose, and audience using a range of strategies" (Texas Education Agency, 2017b). At each grade level students build their writing repertoire to include increasingly sophisticated skills, modes, genres, and styles, but all this learning simply *expands* their rhetorical knowledge. In other words, focusing on the rhetorical situation does not limit the curriculum but rather helps students develop a conceptual understanding of the specific content they learn at each grade level. As for concerns that the approach we recommend could lead to "drill and kill," we certainly encourage teachers to spend no more time on test preparation than is absolutely necessary. The beauty of the rhetorical situation lies in its flexibility. Students should practice analyzing and responding to the rhetorical situation of every writing task they complete throughout the entire school year. By the time testing season rolls around, students should be adept at sizing up a rhetorical situation and responding appropriately, and the STAAR test should be just one more instance of an approach they have practiced all year. This is test preparation teachers can feel good about because it reinforces a type of thinking students can transfer to more meaningful contexts.

Conclusion

Graves (2001) spoke for most of us when he proclaimed that "the ways in which test scores are used in America is one of the most demoralizing, energy-draining forces in education today" (p. 80). Ever the optimist, Graves encouraged teachers to "turn situations

that may be draining into energy-giving events” (p. 83). We believe writing teachers can transform the “draining” assessment that is STAAR into an “energy-giving” event by folding it into a flexible strategy that students can take with them when they leave our classrooms. Students who know how to analyze and respond to rhetorical situations are prepared to face writing tasks that are entirely new to them, and surely nothing gives us energy quite like knowing that we have prepared our students for what lies ahead.

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