

## On Becoming Writing Practitioners

As the co-editor of a national journal, I have been told privately by many English instructors that they would love to contribute something to a journal, faculty newsletter, or newspaper editorial page. Their promises are seldom kept. The common reply when asked to contribute a piece is, "I really don't have the time."

Some educators truly don't have time. Teaching six classes, taking care of children, and possibly taking graduate courses to move up the ranks of community colleges leadership are grueling and nerve-racking. Instructors often haven't done any writing since graduate school and may feel tentative to share their work. But online journals are popping up everywhere with countless opportunities to contribute scholarship and first-person narratives.

One of the recommendations I offer instructors is the classic cliché: Don't reinvent the wheel. I suggest that instructors examine all the successful strategies used in their classrooms to help students succeed. Keeping a log or journaling one of those ideas into a full-fledge article can be a quick, easy way to develop something from scratch. Noting what worked or didn't work in an activity can be a start. Even noting how responsive students were to a certain activity is important.

A colleague who taught reading and was transitioning to English as a discipline felt the pressure to publish. She wanted to impress her colleagues and show that she was a natural fit into the English department, but she believed that, because English was not what she studied in college, she was at a disadvantage. "Why?" I asked.

"Because English majors take courses on grammar, writing, editing. Everything."

I asked her to re-evaluate her priorities and take the plunge. She was returning to graduate school to take courses in English and felt intimidated by her classmates. She completed her coursework. One day, she asked me to read one of the essays she wrote for her graduate seminars. I was impressed with her carefully formed paragraphs and smooth transitions, arguing succinctly from paragraph to paragraph and dramatically making her point. I said, "You know, this would be a great piece for a pedagogy journal. Why don't you submit it?"

"You think so?"

"Of course. We'll send it in as an experiment. If they take it great. If not, that's okay."

"You mean they may reject it?"

"They may have too many submissions on the same topic."

A few months later she called to tell me her submission was scheduled for publication. It was her first. Since then, she has published numerous opinion-editorial pieces for newspapers. She has written book reviews and even edited a collection of faculty essays on first-generation college learners.

Becoming a writing practitioner is one of the basic corollaries for teaching English composition. Because English instructors teach students how to write and develop their craft, it only makes sense that these instructors are in a position to publish their own creative and academic scribbles.

Here are some simple recommendations for individuals hoping to publish their work in an academic journal or newsletter:

1. You should write about what you know is true, but it doesn't hurt to write about what you don't know and discover something new about that topic.
2. Start with an easy-to-read first paragraph and build from there.
3. Once you have finished about 600 to 900 words, leave it alone. It's a draft.
4. Return to it the next day or week with fresh eyes and read it again. As Ernest Hemingway says, "Let it simmer."
5. A draft is the brain's attempt at putting order to chaos. It's thinking with words on paper.
6. Create at least three drafts.
7. Next comes the editing phase. Most people find it hard to eliminate or alter their masterpiece, but it must be done.
8. A second pair of eyes is the best part of completing drafts. We tell this to our students; why not take our own advice?
9. Once your masterpiece is finished and thoroughly polished, it is time for the final step.
10. Give yourself permission to send it off to a journal with a smile and a prayer.

One of the most nail-biting aspects of publishing is waiting. Three things may happen: First, you may get an email indicating that your submission has been received and will be sent out to blind reviewers. This may take a few months. Second, you may get an acceptance reply with a few caveats. It's called "acceptance with recommendations." An editor may be assigned to you to flesh out ideas that are interesting to the editor or the publication. You may

---

either accept this offer or reject it and move on to another journal. Third, you might get a rejection note that reads, "The journal regrets to inform you that although your piece is interesting and well-written, it is not a good fit for us. Please send us something else. Thank you for thinking about The American Scholar." This a gentle way of rejecting your contribution, but leaving the door open for other submissions down the road.

One of the things I tell novice writers is not to give up. Writing is such a subjective field. Some words in your submission may resonate with the next editor you send the piece to. I always tell my writer friends: Don't worry. Rework the piece and send it elsewhere.

Which brings me to the Call for Submissions. This siren call is an opportunity to showcase some of your talent. Lots of early writers, thinkers, and essayists got an early start from this open invitation to publish. I leave you with these words from Stephen King, "Writing is magic, as much the water of life as any other creative art. The water is free. So, drink. Drink and be filled up."

Rafael Castillo, *Professor, English and Humanities*

For more information, contact the author at Palo Alto College, rcastillo3@alamo.edu.