10 WRITING OPPORTUNITIES TO “TEACH TO THE TEST”

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As a third-grade teacher, I felt frustrated with a district requirement to use on-demand prompts to prepare students for standardized writing assessments. Perhaps you share my frustration. Most states require that students pass prompted direct writing assessments, and this requirement influences classroom tasks (Olinghouse, Zheng, & Morlock, 2012). We “teach to the test” to prepare students for the content and context of standardized writing assessments. The content is the qualities of writing taught best through self-selected topics in a writing workshop framework (Graves, 1994). The context, however, expects students to respond to assigned prompts, a task they need to practice (Angelillo, 2005). “Teach to the test” often has a negative connotation because of the political ramifications connected with standardized assessment, but what is tested and how it is tested has an impact on curriculum and how teachers teach (O’Neill, Murphy, Huot, & Williamson, 2006).

I suggest that how we “teach to the test” can be improved for the many of us who already have to use mock writing prompts. We can make better use of class time if we use writing contest prompts and opportunities to support students’ writing development. In the following sections, I provide (a) a rationale for using writing contests as distant audiences and mentor texts, (b) a classroom process for using writing contests to support writing development, and (c) 10 online writing opportunities to support your writing instruction.

Benefits of Writing Contests

Distant Audiences

Many published children’s authors have found writing to distant audiences through contest writing to be beneficial in advancing their careers, such as (a) Vijaya Bodach, author of the Reading Essentials Discovering and Exploring Science series and the Plant Parts series; (b) D. L. Green, author of the Zeke Meeks series; and (c) Tim Wynne-Jones, author of the Rex Zero series.

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Although winning a contest or even receiving feedback is unlikely, participants are motivated to impress the unknown distant audience through meeting the specific contest guidelines and expectations. Such writing practice supports a writer’s development.

When students respond to writing contests, they often are motivated and inspired to submit their writing to the contest’s evaluative distant audience in hopes of winning (Jocson, Burnside, & Collins, 2006). In a sense, they are playing a competitive game while improving their writing and potentially creating mentor texts.

**Mentor Texts**

Mentor texts are models of high-quality writing that writers choose to read, study, and imitate (Dorfman & Cappelli, 2009). When students see examples as “things they themselves could produce, they will write vicariously with the authors” (Smith, 1983, p. 565).

Winning contest entries provide innumerable short mentor texts written by young authors. These entries often include the very genres (persuasive, explanatory, and narrative) that students need to be immersed in for instructional and real-life purposes (National Governors Association Center for Best Practices & Council of Chief State School Officers, 2010). Receiving explicit instruction about genres (Purcell-Gates, Duke, & Martineau, 2007) and learning how to compare their work to mentor texts (Underwood & Tregidgo, 2006) allow students to lean on authors as other teachers of writing.

**Using Writing Contests**

Teachers can implement the following four stages within functioning writing workshops over two to five days in 45–60-minute lessons to implement writing contests.

**Stage 1: Genre Exploration**

Collect winning contest entries that can be used as mentor texts for your specific grade level and writing purpose. For example, as a third-grade teacher, I collected winning essays of third and fourth graders to support our curriculum’s essay unit of study.

Read winning contest entries with your students as mentor texts with a writer’s eye (Smith, 1983). Notice authors’ use of leads, endings, details, word choice, and other writing techniques explored in writing workshop. For example, one mentor text my students and I reviewed had a suspenseful dialogue lead written by a third-grade contestant who won third place in The Writing Conference, Inc. contest (Senatore, 2007). Many of my students felt they could write like this author and attempted to write similar leads for their essays.

Through discussion, help students understand that writing for contests supports their standardized assessment preparation because both writing tasks share the following characteristics: (a) prompts initiate a response; (b) audience is distant and unknown; and (c) purposes include enjoyment, competition, and evaluation.

**Stage 2: Teacher Models**

Select a writing contest prompt. Read aloud to students the prompt, contest guidelines, rules, and rubric. Select a personal topic that responds to the prompt. Think aloud as you draft and revise your entry.

**Stage 3: Students Write**

Provide students a writing contest prompt. Instruct them to use the writing process they have learned in writing workshop concerning writer’s craft. Students consider their distant audience; self-evaluate their work based on the writing contest guidelines, rules, and rubric; and choose whether to submit their entry to the contest.

**Step 4: Students Share**

Students share their responses either with a partner, small group, or through Author’s Chair (Graves, 1994). Finally, the teacher collects the entries to provide effective feedback because few students if any will receive feedback from the contests. This feedback is also important for the teacher to assess students’ writing development and provide future instruction targeted
to students’ needs (Anderson, 2005). Students may revise their responses and choose to submit their work to the contest.

10 Writing Opportunities
The following section describes the content of 10 websites that include no-fee writing contests or publishing opportunities, although some make money by selling anthologies of published entries. Many of the sites post winning and exemplary entries that can be used as mentor texts.

Creative Communication: A Celebration of Today’s Writers (www.poeticpower.com)
Third through 12th graders can enter nonfiction essays of up to 300 words on any topic on this website. They host three essay contests annually with February, August, and October deadlines. Students compete regionally in grade-level divisions as follows: 3rd–6th, 7th–9th, and 10th–12th. They also host three poetry contests annually with April, August, and December deadlines. Grade-level designations include K–3rd, 4th–6th, 7th–9th, and 10th–12th, which ease reviewing the winning entries for mentor texts. Because any topic is welcomed, teachers who are expected to provide a specific prompt per district requirements can use this writing contest as the distant audience for the required prompt.

The Grannie Annie Family Story Celebration (www.thegrannieannie.org)
The Grannie Annie publishes family stories written by fourth through eighth graders. Students interview family members about events that occurred before the student was born. Students then write their family member’s story in 275–500 words by February 1st each year. Through this task, students learn to blend explanatory and narrative genres through collected research. Stories are selected for publication in the yearly Grannie Annie volume of family stories. Books can be purchased for $10.00–$14.95. In addition, selected stories categorized by specific dates (e.g., 1872–1939, 1976–1990) can be reviewed on the site and used as mentor texts.

The Legacy Project’s Listen to a Life Contest (www.legacyproject.org/contests/ltol.html)
With an annual March deadline, this website invites 300-word essays from students 8–18 years old that reflect on an interview with a person who is 50+ years old about his or her life experiences, dreams, goals, challenges, and successes. Past winning stories are also available (www.tcpnow.com/contests/winners.html).

Letters About Literature (www.lettersaboutliterature.org)
This contest is sponsored by the Center for the Book in the Library of Congress. Fourth through 10th graders of participating states write personal letters to an author of their choice, dead or living, whose work has influenced their view of the world or themselves. Past winning entries can be reviewed as mentor texts that blend persuasive, explanatory, and narrative genres (www.lettersaboutliterature.org/winning_letters/winning_letters_from_past_competitions). I find this writing task of responding to an author’s work especially useful for reading and writing instruction.

Magic Dragon (www.magicdragonmagazine.com)
The Association for Encouragement of Children’s Creativity publishes Magic Dragon quarterly. Although not a contest, elementary school students can submit their poems, stories, essays, or artwork on any topic for publication. The site also offers “Write It” activities that can be used as prompts or instructional tasks for students. Purchasing a past or current issue of the magazine for $4.00 or $5.50, respectively, can provide numerous mentor texts.

Optimist Club (www.optimist.org/e/member/scholarships3.cfm)
If your local Optimist Club does not already host an essay contest for students younger than 19, you can request that they do so by emailing programs@optimist.org to request a district chair’s contact information who will connect you with a local Optimist Club. Students submit contest entries to the local club that will determine a deadline before the District Optimist Club’s end of February deadline, in which each local winning entry competes for a $2,500 scholarship. In 700–800 words, students share their opinion through persuasive, explanatory, or narrative genres in response to the prompt. Some past prompts include “How My Positive

“Students may revise their responses and choose to submit their work to the contest.”
Outlook Benefits My Community” and “How I Help My Friends Realize Their Value.” I like to invite a local Optimist Club member to the classroom to introduce the contest so students have some idea of their audience.

**PBS Kids Writers Contest** (pbskids.org/writerscontest/contest.php)

Contact your local PBS station to find out if they are participating. Kindergarten through third-grade students enter the contest individually, write a story, and include at least five illustrations, which are all important strengths of this contest. Stories are often a genre with which students are familiar and naturally excited to write. Word count for K through first and second through third graders is 50–200 and 100–350 words, respectively. In addition, past winning entries can be viewed and sorted by topics (biography, family, sports, state, grade, prize, and year).

**Scholastic** (clubs2.scholastic.com/programs/)

Scholastic offers multiple literacy-based contests (reading, writing, and visual arts) through their website and through some of their magazines (e.g., *Scope* and *Storyworks*). The website has mentor texts of past writing contest genres such as personal letters, essays, and narratives. The magazine websites have some articles and contest guidelines, although purchasing subscriptions ensures access to the magazines’ contests. *Junior Scholastic/Current Events*, Scholastic’s social studies magazine, will continue *Weekly Reader’s* wonderful “Eye Witness to History” contest, in which students interview a relative or family friend who lived through an important historical event and then write up the interview as the contest.

**The Writing Conference, Inc.** (www.writingconference.com/contest.htm)

With a January deadline, The Writing Conference, Inc. welcomes all students to write in narrative, poetic, or expository genres to a specific prompt selected yearly (e.g., change, friendship, courage, competition). The winning entries are published in their magazine, *The Writers’ Slate*, in which innumerable grade-level mentor texts can be used for instructional purposes (www.writingconference.com). I find this site’s tasks and resources especially teacher-friendly and useful.

**Young Voices Foundation: Mentoring Young Writers** (www.youngvoicesfoundation.org/youngvoiceshome.html)

Check out this website every few months for contests and winning entries. Along with an annual poetry contest, they provide three themed fiction/nonfiction short story contests quarterly in the following grade-level categories: K–2nd, 3rd–6th, and 7th–12th. In addition, this site offers the opportunity to publish school or classroom anthologies (www.youngvoicesfoundation.org/forteachers.html). Upon accepting a proposal from an authorized person in your organization, the foundation issues a publishing contract. Anthologies can be purchased through the website or Amazon for around $15 per book. Schools earn a royalty of $2.00 for each book, regardless of how many books sell. This opportunity is useful for creating an end-of-the-year classroom anthology keepsake.

**Conclusion**

Within the current political and educative context, in which high-stakes standardized assessments create a pressure-filled experience for teachers to “teach to the test,”
time spent on writing instruction that transfers between classroom and assessment contexts is crucial. I have found that students who practice writing in a playful sense by responding to writing contests, even if they choose not to submit their work, can experience more success than practicing writing under contrived assessment conditions.

REFERENCES

MORE TO EXPLORE
ReadWriteThink.org Lesson Plans
- “The Magic of Three: Techniques for the Writer’s Craft” by Lori Jamison Rog
- “Prompting Revision Through Modeling and Written Conversations” by Ashley Thesen
- “Writing Workshop: Helping Writers Choose and Focus on a Topic” by Erika Griffin

IRA Book

IRA Journal Articles
- “An Effective Framework for Primary-Grade Guided Writing Instruction” by Sharan A. Gibson, The Reading Teacher, September 2010