Composing for Delivery

Reviving a concept from classical rhetoric, Kate Kessler shows how delivery is the key to authentic writing. Her students become engaged with the writing process, knowing their letters and proposals will be read by real audiences, and are further encouraged by seeing the positive results of their well-presented ideas.

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But let us not forget the fifth canon of rhetoric. Though its importance has diminished in the writing classroom, delivery may have the ability to knit product writing and process writing into a successful post-process classroom practice. When students deliver writing to an actual audience, consideration of writing conventions makes product as much a concern as process.

Composition Pedagogy and Delivery

I had taught high school English for ten years before graduate school led me to examine writing instruction in relation to these classical canons of rhetoric. Invention, arrangement, and style were almost intuitively part of my teaching, but I taught them without any idea of their significance in the history of rhetoric. I did not even consider memory or delivery as part of writing pedagogy.

As a graduate student, however, I found that learning about the canons could inform my writing pedagogy. The canon of delivery was especially helpful. Writing for a teacher for a grade was not enough to make me want to write well. Because I wanted my writing to mean more, I looked for audiences beyond my teachers. I began to write papers with one eye on the academic requirements and the other on the audiences.

I intentionally retained my student vision when I again reached for my teacher hat. Why should students write just for a teacher or a grade? Why not encourage them to compose for real audiences and employ delivery as a motivation for writing well?

Delivery helps make writing extracurricular and meaningful. Plagiarism disappears because composing for delivery is personal and demands author ownership. I am talking about actual, physical delivery—sealing compositions in envelopes and walking them to the post office. Although this sounds obvious, I have never met a colleague in composition who practices physical delivery of student compositions, aside from the occasional writing contest. My students tell me that they have not practiced delivery in other classes.

Though classical rhetoric was concerned primarily with oral delivery, similar rhetorical considerations are required of modern written delivery. In delivery of classical oral rhetoric, concern for audience and purpose was reflected in dress, gestures, expressions, and vocal tone. In delivery of modern writing, concern for audience and purpose is reflected in font, format, style, tone, and writing conventions.

The Call to Compose—and Deliver

A good way to begin teaching composition for delivery is to invoke what John Trimbur terms “the call to write.” A call to write is the impulse we feel when we have something to say and when writing is the best medium.

I ask students to begin composition for delivery by thinking of something they want to say to someone in a letter. Students have experience with letters; they have written them for years. But they think about letters to friends, for social purposes. To participate in academic and civic life, students must also learn to write public discourse, and the familiar genre of a letter is a good place to start. There are many types of professional letters students will have to write in their lives: legal letters, medical letters, letters of complaint, letters of request, and thank-you letters.

During the invention stage, I encourage students to explore their calls to write. Although I do not specify the type of letter, complaints are the most common.

What is it they have to complain about? There are so many things! We begin the process part of composing for delivery by investing further in the first canon, invention. We freewrite, map, and list ideas about someone or something that has made us feel we have been treated unfairly. This is cathartic as well as creative. I write along with students because there are things that I want to say, too. Modeling is a good way to get the students to understand that writing for delivery matters in the “real world.” Some students are ready to lick the envelope right away. But then I ask the crucial question: “What do you want from this person or group?”

It is not enough to tell someone off. I want students to know that they have the power to effect change.
change. While we have a lot of fun sharing our first drafts, I have to let students know there is more to delivery than the “You really told him!” that fill the air. I ask, “What do you think he’ll do with your letter?”

After a puzzled quiet, someone will respond, “Throw it away.”

“But what do you want to happen as a result of your writing?”

The concept of audience is not new, but few students have considered that they have the power to effect change through their writing because few have ever written for an audience other than the teacher. Students are excited by this new thought: write something, deliver it, and receive a response?

The Practice of Composing for Delivery

I share with the class several of my letters of complaint that have received responses. One is to the mayor of Baltimore, protesting a $70 ticket that a traffic officer had written me for making a left-hand turn. I had not seen the no-turn sign because it was so badly worn. I then show them the letter Mr. O’Malley wrote back to me. He had driven to the area himself and wrote back to affirm that the sign was “duly noted to be in poor maintenance.” He said he could see where a motorist would not have been able to see the sign. I still had to pay the ticket, but I had the satisfaction of having motivated the mayor of Baltimore to drive past a badly maintained sign. Perhaps maintenance will be done.

Another letter of complaint to a mattress company had an even more favorable result: a free mattress delivered to my house. A corrupt cable company, an incompetent check-labeling company, and a myopic prosecuting attorney have all been the recipients of my powerful pen. All have written back, and each time I have gotten satisfaction: an apology, a refund, and a retrial. The point is not lost on students: Composing for delivery can elicit response and have real results. But to get the results they want, their writing must be carefully crafted and rhetorically sensitive.

Like all literacies, rhetorically sensitive writing must be taught. Rhetorical sensitivities such as audience, purpose, occasion, register, and style are often not considered when composing. Students need a safe environment in which to practice them, and the writing classroom can provide that space.

Composing for delivery in the classroom begins by forming writing groups and engaging in invention techniques. While brainstorming in writing workshop, Abby admitted that something had been bothering her. “Like a lot of teenagers in my home town, I’ve worked in a family-owned seafood restaurant for the past four years. For graduation the owners, Bob and Gina, gave every senior a card with a $100 bill inside. I got a card but no $100 bill. It’s not that I want the money per se, but I wondered if it was just a mistake or if they were angry with me about something. I’d really like to know.” Her group asked if she was going to work there again next summer. “I really don’t know,” Abby replied.

“Well, then, what have you got to lose by writing and asking them?” a member of the group asked. Abby needed an answer to her question. She was too shy to call and ask. A letter seemed like the best delivery device. Her peers encouraged her to write a letter of inquiry since this was her true call to write.

Abby already knew her audience well. Her purpose was clear. She decided that an informal register and casual style would be most appropriate.
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She began by assuming an appropriately informal rhetorical stance:

Dear Bob and Gina,

After receiving this envelope and looking at the return address, you are probably wondering why I am writing you this letter. Something has been on my mind and I need to ask you a question.

Despite the large number of graduates, you both decided to give each one a beautiful and inspiring card with a gift inside. After receiving the card I talked to co-workers about the wonderful blessing you gave to us all. That’s when I learned that I was the only graduate who did not receive a hundred dollar gift in their card. I am hurt because I feel singled out. “What did I do wrong?” has lingered in my mind constantly since then. The right thing to do would have been to ask both of you about the omission right after it occurred, but I never had the courage.

Abby went on to describe the situation in detail, wrote about her happy memories of working at the restaurant, and apologized if she had made either of the owners uncomfortable. Though written in letter format, Abby appropriately chose a card as the medium for her message.

She mailed her card with more than a little anxiety. But perhaps because we carefully craft writing that is delivered to actual audiences, all responses have been positive. Abby’s was no exception.

Within a week and a half, she received a response from Gina that began with an emotive, “I can’t believe you kept this inside! It was forgetful of Bob! Why would we single you out, of all people?” The letter’s tone and adjectives delivered exactly what Abby had needed to hear. To top it off, a $100 bill was folded into a tiny square and taped into the corner of the card.

It was the call to write that led Abby to care enough to create a rhetorically sensitive letter that she was proud to deliver. Product became as important as process.

Although Abby was a high school senior when her call to write occurred, composing for delivery could work equally well for students in all other grades.

The specifics of the letter assignment begin with an explanatory handout (see fig. 1). We then work collaboratively to create an evaluation checklist. For this first assignment we create a checklist that combines elements of product and process writing combined with rhetorical sensitivity. We negotiate that the checklist for this assignment will require the following:

> an opening paragraph that clearly establishes the purpose for writing (thesis)
> effective use of a deliberate rhetorical stance (who you are in relation to your topic)
> credible evidence that supports the thesis
> choice of an appropriate audience (the person with the power to effect the change you seek)
> appropriate register, tone, and word choice for the audience and purpose
> standard writing conventions for the audience (grammar, punctuation, and mechanics)

We then work in process writing groups for invention, arrangement, and style considerations. We use only what seems to be useful, something that is hard to quantify. We review everything on our checklists in revision and editing workshops. When we are satisfied that the letter is as well-written as possible for its audience and purpose, I take the letters to the post office.

I mail these first letters myself. Students confess that if delivery is left to them, they will not mail their first calls to write. This new dimension to composition needs to be reinforced with audience response before delivery becomes a responsibility they welcome.
Delivery and Response

After teaching high school English for fifteen years, I transitioned to teaching college English. I found that audience response is as important to first-year college students as it is to high school seniors. For example, art majors Chrisi and Katie were tired of lugging portfolios across town in the rain to reach their off-campus art classes. They researched the campus transit system, compared it to other campus transit systems, then composed and delivered their proposed transportation changes to the director of campus transportation. Chrisi began her letter, "My name is Chrisi Mohn and I am a freshman art student. When I visited campus during summer orientation one of the perks advertised about the university was the exceptional bus service provided for students. Now that I'm here, the bus service has proved to be not so accommodating as I was led to believe. I am writing to see a change during my time here." Chrisi made sure the director understood her rhetorical stance: a tuition-paying student and potentially generous alumna.

Katie began her letter more directly: "Please reroute a transit bus to make a stop at the new Art Studio Center on Grace Street." She explained the logistics of traveling to an off-campus class, including the fact that several students and faculty have been hit by cars while crossing streets to get to the art studio.

The director's response came in the form of action: Within a week, a new bus route was created. Both Chrisi and Katie emailed me with the news: "We now have a special bus that picks up art students four times a day and drives them directly to the door of the Art Studio. The new bus schedule is set up so that it works perfectly on time with the art classes. See you in class and thanks for a very helpful assignment!"

Within weeks, more responses appeared. It is a tradition for students to share responses to their writings. Some, most notably from politicians, are form letters. But most responses are "real," that is, written by people who read the students' letters and respond to what was said.

Students are encouraged to know that their compositions have civic as well as academic meaning. Delivery opens writers' options. Negotiations between the writer and the text take on added dimensions when the writer knows the text will be received and evaluated by a real audience. Students whose writings are prompted by topic, for example, must negotiate how to present the problem in the most powerful way to the appropriate audience. They must research what their audience already knows and feels about their topic and consider how to best craft their writing to have the desired effect. Writing that is prompted by audience, on the other hand, must negotiate the problem, the genre, the language, and both the writer's and reader's rhetorical stances. Because composing for delivery begins in response to a real situation, it automatically invites audience response. Students imagine such response as they compose.

Delivery is not independent of a written message; it is an integral part of the message. There is a difference between imagining an audience for a classroom exercise and imagining an audience for delivery. Nora Bacon is correct in her assertion that there is a contradiction in trying to teach "rhetorical awareness within the limited rhetorical environment of the classroom" (592). But rhetorical awareness has meaning when a writer knows that his or her work will be delivered.

We progress from letters to proposals. Proposals differ from letters mainly in degree of exposition. They convey more complex information and require more research. A proposal addresses what needs to be added, removed, or improved and how to go about accomplishing the task. The register, tone, word choice, and presentation of a proposal is more formal. For example, we use cotton-bond paper and formal business-letter formatting.

Students often choose to write proposals about situations in their home and school communities. They research these situations and write proposals for everything from ergonomically correct student desks to skate parks. Responses have included the school board releasing funds to upgrade student desk seats. Seventy thousand dollars was allocated for a skate park! Students are thrilled to learn that their proposals can be instruments of change.
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Katie, a first-year college student from Massachusetts, wrote a proposal to the commissioners of her hometown proposing a community center. Katie was adept in noting that the community center could have multiple functions. Beyond the usual hangout place, the center could also function as a literacy center, a tutoring center, a day care, and an after-school programs facility.

Because her proposal was well written and relevant to the community’s needs, Katie soon received a positive response. In addition to the response sent to Katie, the president of the Massachusetts Arts and Recreation Center Foundation sent a letter to me, Katie’s English teacher. It began, “Recently, our Foundation received a wonderful letter from one of your students, Katie O’Dowd. Katie sent her letter to the Town Hall. The Boxford Board of Selectmen forwarded it on to our committee. We were thrilled to read her letter. It has made quite an impact on our committee.”

The president went on to say:

When Katie’s letter appeared before our group we were thrilled that a young person identified with our mission and was trying her best to bring it to the attention of town officials. . . . Katie has given us her permission to submit her letter to the local newspaper. We believe her message echoes the thoughts and concerns that many of her peers feel. I know that I am not alone when I say how proud and lucky we are as a town to have such a thoughtful and caring person as Katie O’Dowd trying to make a difference in her community. (Mudgett)

How much more rewarding can teaching writing be than to receive such a letter? Teaching composing for delivery has given me a new lease on pedagogical life!

Part of the reason that Katie’s proposal was successful was that the class created an evaluation checklist built on the checklist used in the first assignment. We spent time discussing what would be important in a successful proposal and negotiated that the checklist would require the following:

> an opening paragraph that clearly establishes the purpose for writing
> presentation of the problem from both your own and the audience’s point of view
> an effective choice of an audience (the person or organization with the power to put the proposal to work)
> effective use of rhetorical stance
> credible evidence that supports the proposal
> arrangement that will facilitate the proposal
> appropriate register and tone for the audience and purpose
> appropriate writing conventions for the audience

Of course, different calls to write require different checklists. Students learn quickly and are able to create their checklists for future assignments. An interesting phenomenon happens when students compose for delivery: as compositions become less like assignments and more like true calls to write, students create sophisticated checklists that raise the evaluation bar.

In addition to creating individualized checklists, we also discuss the need for individualized genres for each true call to write. From in-class essays to editorials to grant proposals, students must decide which genre best fits each call.

One of our most challenging genres was to collaboratively create brochures for next year’s students. This call came during discussion one day when I asked students what they wished they had known their first semester at a university. The floodgates opened and we knew we had another call to write.

Students had so many ideas that we broke the class into groups of related interests. Students then brainstormed about information they wished they had known as first-semester college students. Roommate issues. Food issues. Classes. Homesickness. Partying. What could we do with all these ideas? Creating brochures for incoming students was the students’ choice of genre and audience.

Students tell me that this was a labor of love. Their rhetorical stance was clear: They were experts, first-semester students themselves. They were eager to help their audience, next year’s first-year students, answer questions they did not even know they would be asking. The call to write, audience, purpose, and genre fell into place. Students then researched and created many different brochures, including a four-star rating system of the campus dining services using food quality, times open, payment options, and
staff friendliness as factors. They researched and created a guide to the campus bus system using places, times, dependability, and driver friendliness as factors. They researched and created brochures about the campus health system, recreation facilities, transportation systems for home visits, and how to party safely. After the research and composition were finished, the remaining task was to create a product that would be well-received by their audience.

Students chose to desktop publish their brochures. Their technical expertise and understanding of the importance of presentation amazed me. We soon had piles of glossy, attractive brochures filled with substantial information. We were so proud of these that I took copies to the first-year student orientation committee. Next year, incoming students will see helpful brochures written by those who know best.

Brochures can work equally well in various settings. High school students might create brochures to welcome and inform middle school students. Graduating seniors might create brochures for rising seniors. Because the audiences and purposes are changeable, writing becomes a creative process as well as a presentable product.

Ironically, an example of a less-successful student composition may illustrate the importance of the combination of process with product when composing for delivery. Brian began with a true call to write: A native of New Jersey, he needed reliable transportation between campus and his hometown. Brian studiously researched the viability of a train transportation system that would accommodate students whose universities bordered established East Coast rail routes. He found compelling evidence for his proposal to Amtrak that it buy the rights to these rail routes: nationwide, college students spend over $5 billion annually on transportation. His proposal was sound and convincing in all respects save one: Grammatical errors so detracted from the proposal’s presentation that I fear it was not taken seriously. All he received was a perfunctory form letter to what was, contentwise, an exceptional business proposal.

We can see the importance of presentation when we consider that the first orator to publish deliberative speeches, classical rhetorician Demosthenes, was subject to harassment when he could not deliver his compositions well. He had to learn how to deliver in a way that pleased his audiences for them to grasp the truth and power of his message. Demosthenes eventually grasped the importance of delivery. When asked what was most important in successful rhetoric, he replied, “Delivery, delivery, and delivery.”

Teaching Composition for Delivery

Composing for delivery is one way to enter into what Gesa E. Kirsch calls “engaged rhetoric.” How do we teach students to compose with traditional academic vigor while helping them to use language to engage with the world? How do we help them realize that language, and writing in particular, has power and can effect change? I hope to teach engaged writing by collecting the best of our pedagogical practices into a combination that evokes, as Gary A. Olson says, “the exact purpose of the writer in the exact context of the writing” (426). One student offered this feedback on the engaged rhetoric called on in composing for delivery:

Before taking this class I honestly thought our society had reached the point where one’s opinion didn’t matter anymore. I mean who could blame me, with companies’ CEOs cheating people out of millions of dollars, real customer service representatives being replaced by a computerized touch tone phone that gives you the run around, and politicians who allow themselves to be financed by big corporations. I was skeptical at first but when I got responses back from both of the writings I sent out I changed my opinion. They showed evidence that a human being had taken the time to sit down, read my writing, and then respond back to me about it.

Teaching writing is not just about a teacher audience. One of our goals as writing teachers should be to prepare students to write beyond the academic classroom. They need to be prepared to enter the world of civic literacy. The writing classroom can be a laboratory where students are given the opportunity for experimentation in composing for delivery.

Perhaps the most convincing call to teach composition for delivery comes from students who have practiced it.

I was a bit overwhelmed when I found out that these proposals were going to be sent to someone to be read and taken seriously. This made me work much harder, knowing I was going to have someone actually read my letter, and then respond. I
think the most rewarding part of writing was putting a lot of effort into it and then getting a response back from my intended audience.

Most writing I ever did was for a writing assignment in school. Now I realize that I can use writing when I have a point that should be heard. The papers we wrote were addressed to real people and we wrote about something that was actually important to us. From this class I realize that writing will be with me all the time no matter what profession I choose, whether I want to be a lawyer, a businessman, or even a doctor.

One student’s feedback in particular provides me with the motivation to continue teaching composition for delivery:

My writing class was a total success. I learned things about myself and my writing capabilities and what it takes to fulfill the call to write. It aided me the most for my future. It introduced writing as a real life situation, not just a teacher assignment. I learned that if you have a voice about something you feel strongly about, it would be a shame not to let it be heard. The most important thing about the class is that it showed me that my writing is a tool that should be used to reach out to the world.

Our teaching of composition will continue to evolve, and we will continue to debate new pedagogy.

That’s good. While our conversations continue, we might do well to remember that reading theorists and teachers are realizing that despite the divisiveness between alphabetic and whole-language approaches to reading instruction, a combination of pedagogies may well be the best thing for students (Adams). As writing teachers and theorists, let us likewise look for ways to combine the good aspects of product, process, and post-process writing instruction. A return to composing for delivery may be a useful way to put these good things into practice.

Works Cited
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Composing for Delivery

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EJ 25 Years Ago

Coaching English

I know, as a coach, that I have been successful when my players develop skills, win or lose, out of respect for themselves. The same is true in my English classes. I am successful when my students write a paper solely because they feel they have something important to say. But this success does not just happen. Whether on the field or in the classroom, I work to develop situations in which players or students initially have time to develop without the pressure of performance. It is only then that I can move on to establish skill development by taking an active role—stressing positive reinforcement and self-esteem. What works on the field also works in the classroom.