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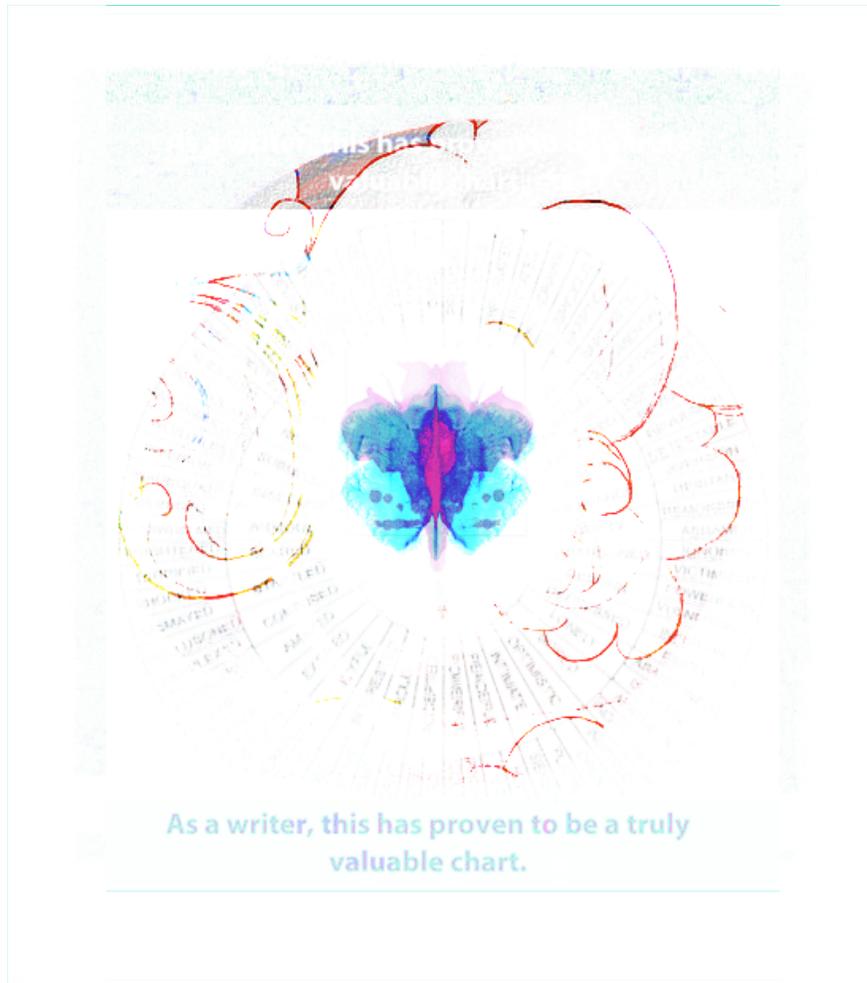
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college and career ready: aligning local organizations to end please-the-teacher syndrome

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*How can we get students to write for their own reasons and not simply for a grade? Who are the relevant stakeholders in refining writing purposes?*

## College and Career Ready: Aligning Local Organizations to End Please-The-Teacher Syndrome

Serena Mari Garcia

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“ [The students] want to know something in their brain matches what I, as their instructor, must clearly hold as the “correct” response. They can’t believe that I genuinely want to read what they have to write, not a regurgitated response about what I think on the subject. ”

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### Please-the-Teacher Syndrome

“But I don’t know what to write about?”

“I’m stuck!”

“I just can’t get it!”

All are classic refrains from frustrated students taking writing courses. They offer up their painfully forlorn looks, begging for any answer to make their assignment easier. Sadly this happens quite often in a writing class—and it doesn’t matter whether it’s a high school or university writing class: I know because I teach both.

My usual no-nonsense attitude begins the guiding process. “So far, we’ve gone through reading *Fahrenheit 451* and *1984*. What do those books have in common with each other and with your current independent study novel? How do the subjects relate to the media used in unit two? What have you learned throughout this process? What implications do these readings have for current events, your work environment, or future goals?” My job is to help them overcome their perfection paralysis.

But if the students looked miserable before my line of questioning, they now look as though I’ve blown their cerebral circuits. A few of them look as though I just kicked a puppy. Despite giving them think-time (Stahl), fear and worry supersede frustration and they begin to question: “What did she just say to me? Have I made the right decision being in this class? Can she see right through me? What right do I have to say anything? Why can’t she just tell me what she wants?” And, whether the student is aware of it or not, the last question is causing them the most grief.

It’s not that they don’t know what to write; instead, they just haven’t learned to work through the conflagration of their many ideas to choose the most effective mode for their writing. They want to know something in their brain matches what I, as their instructor, must clearly hold as the “correct” response. They can’t believe I genuinely want to read what they have to write, not a regurgitated response about what I think on the subject. Students who hit

this roadblock are, usually, very articulate and promising writers who have just reached an impasse. Unlike a seasoned writer, who can take a break, refresh her mind, and come back to a project, this type of paralysis is more sinister. No amount of time away will help them tackle the problem because they haven't yet learned to bridge the gap between process and product. In fact, taking time off may cause the writer more anxiety because of a problem I call Please-the-Teacher Syndrome.

Please-the-Teacher Syndrome produces a gap in the ability to support opinions, so students simply look for an easy way out by writing something they think will get them a good grade, and since writing is an extremely personal process producing a product for critiquing, this gap is most perceptible to instructors of writing between secondary and first year writing programs.

Unfortunately, an instructor can perpetuate a student's inability to fashion a cogent writing product for an occasion. Instructors run their classrooms how they see fit; they can construct intense or lackadaisical criteria for any number of writing assignments. Students can become very adept at building a rapport with their writing instructor, going to office hours or emailing to consistently ask *What can I do better?*, and/or holding instructor comments about their writing as gospel. Miraculously, the final draft matches exactly what the teacher wanted. This doesn't mean the student is a good writer or that he has the ability to respond to various rhetorical situations, only that he is willing to change voice or style to equal the teacher's expectations, get a passing grade, and move through his course load.

### **"Why Can't Students Write Better?"**

I currently work as a high school teacher of freshmen, a dual enrollment instructor for upper level students at the same campus, and a lecturer at a local university. Because of this fluidity, I often meet people whose biggest complaint about writing is, "Why can't students write better?" At first, the answer was a simple and sardonic retort: "Well, what are you doing to help students get better at writing?" Obviously, that doesn't get to the root of the issue or begin to offer a solution. But I realized there was something valid to the question and to my response: How can more people work together to build better writers? Then I searched the writing of struggling students and identified Please-the-Teacher Syndrome. So why are students more focused on pleasing their teacher and not on fostering their own writing motives? Several reasons are likely.

Take the required Texas state standards (where I teach) of English Language Arts and Reading (ELAR) which mandate mastery of the writing process and the ability to produce a multitude of different texts, like: "reader responses of literary texts," "expository or procedural texts," and "persuasive texts," all while being versed in "oral and written conventions," "handwriting, capitalization, punctuation," and "spelling." Throughout the course of their four years in ELAR courses, students should also become problem solvers able to "research and gather sources," to "synthesize information," and "present [their]

ideas” through “listening, speaking, and teamwork” (Texas Education Agency). Similarly, South Texas College and the University of Texas-Pan American have “program and course learning outcomes” to build competencies in “the writing process,” “audience and purpose,” and “research and documentation strategies” to name a few (Haske; UTPA). Standards of secondary and university writing are almost identical, but their execution is left entirely up to the organizations and the instructor in each section. Incidentally, curriculum is more about what students should learn; they are not requirements on how teachers should be covering these topics (Dunlosky). Some teachers are given free-reign in their classrooms without goal-setting or foundational work for their organizational or community needs. Others are stymied with “overprescribed” lesson plans that can be “detrimental to teaching and learning” (Rose).

It’s also no secret that funding for public education has been waning since the early 2000s. Teachers are being asked to do more with much less while the student population has multiplied exponentially every year (Karen Barry Creative Development). In other words, things like textbooks, pens or pencils, and even copy paper can be hoarded by a district or campus trying to reduce overhead costs. Teachers stressed about finding resources for their class might fall behind on lesson planning or classroom management, which contributes to a poor learning environment. How can a writing teacher teach writing when their low socio-economic students show up with no paper or writing utensils?

Public education is ever changing, and scrounging for funding isn’t the only concern. Another shift has been in educational goals. Instead of letting students experiment, delve deeply in material or learn in age-group appropriate ways, phrases like “data driven” and “goal oriented” are used to promote ideals like “College and Career Ready” or “College for All” by promoting a “No Excuses” culture which can neglect students with special needs, gifted students, and those with language barriers. The resulting assessment culture is perverse with students, parents, and teachers palpably anxious about “test score equal[ing] merit” (Sacks).

Mentorship and/or training of writing teachers are another likely cause. People can choose one of two paths to become a teacher in the state of Texas. The Texas Education Agency (TEA) requires those in traditional university education programs to complete student teaching under the guidance of a veteran teacher. A student teacher will help design lesson plans and tutor students, while taking classes on behavior management, pedagogy, and content to build a solid foundation for teaching. Then, still under a veteran teacher’s supervision, they take over the classroom for an extended period of time as prescribed by their College of Education and their campus-site principal. Upon successful compliance, the student teacher can test for their certifications, graduate, and become fully certified.

The second route is more lenient. Alternative certification programs (ACP) require a one-year internship, where probationary certified teachers are hired into a classroom of their own without any prior teaching experience.

Often, those in this type of certification are thrown into a “trial by fire” situation, with limited supervision from their campus or program superiors, that isn’t conducive to the development of great teachers (Mior). Depending on the alternative program’s course structure, it is possible and even likely that those on this track may not have had a class on pedagogy, classroom management, behavioral issues, or content.

In either case, after the first year, teachers are considered veterans and not required to maintain a professional mentorship. The guide at my first public school employment left to attend graduate school in her home state and, after that year, I’ve never had another officially assigned mentor. At every college I’ve worked at, I have never received any professional training nor have I formally been provided a mentor. Thankfully, because of my professional network, I have identified writing instructors and program administrators who can mentor and guide me through the expectations and necessities of the position; however, this isn’t the case for all incoming writing instructors.

### **Using Various Methods to Create College and Career Ready Writers**

Challenging any of these causes can nurture better writers. However, when each is attacked simultaneously, a solid base can be built so students can become critical thinkers, rhetorical writers, and more capable adaptors to different writing and communication situations.

#### *Method 1: Aligning the Community and Its Writing Projects*

How can identifying better writing goals and having communication between secondary and post secondary education foster a better writer? Think of a family planning a cross-country road trip. First, the family, preferably through some sort of democratic process, chooses the location to vacation. When the travelers know the location they are headed, they then must use outside sources to research the costs of the trip, decide the best routes, lodging, food options, and appropriate stops to refuel, etc. Likewise, writing teachers should be able to know exactly where and how to guide writing students to their final destination. If the end goal should be to make “College and Career Ready” students, shouldn’t there be an agreement that writing is the fundamental component necessary in every aspect of college and career readiness? Shouldn’t colleges and members of local career industries be vertically aligned with secondary education to produce opportunities for learning to maximize success in writing and communication skills?

I fight the battle to bridge the writing gap between high school and college writing in my class every day, though I am hardly alone. Many of my colleagues do the same thing, but it is difficult to form a space for our specific expertise to work together in the confines of our separate and varied institutions. Writing teachers tend to stick together in a de facto way but

constraints of time, money, resources, and drive keep us all clinging to what and whom we know and grasping at innovative ways to address Please-the-Teacher Syndrome. It isn't always easy, but we can rely on each other to diagnose issues and create action plans to address our unique needs. However, often missing is the voice and input from local businesses.

Instead of accidental professional networking, creating a local cohort of high school writing teachers, dual enrollment teachers, first year writing instructors at post secondary institutions, and the biggest local employers can be a real step to bridging the Please-the-Teacher Syndrome gap. Unfortunately, secondary education has many of these outreach requirements, but not enough manpower or financial resources to achieve active cross-institutional involvement. When this is truly built, they can then bring in employers willing to take responsibility in the process as well. Such a liaison program can create project-based assignments to fulfill a tangible and crucial need within the community (Thomas). Writing students could grow exponentially if they were able to take ownership of identifying a problem within their surroundings, providing solutions for it, and communicating a course of action for the project to an active audience.

#### *Method 2: Combatting Testing Culture by Creating Rhetorical Spaces*

Chronic testing makes terrible writers and in some institutions this attitude has helped catapult me to master teacher status because I design assignments to shape transferable communication and writing skills. However, too often, disagreements about the importance of writing taxonomy have occurred between myself and those who are severely nervous about the testing culture; it's gotten so bad that a dean of instruction once actually told me, "We aren't supposed to be teaching students to think." Despite this frightening negativity, and depending on the grade level of my specific set of students, I teach to help students write better within the confines of standardized testing or to overcome being the product of said testing within the afforded timeframe (classes can run anywhere from six to eighteen weeks up to a full academic year). By creating a true rhetorical space where students and I can build background knowledge, foster ideas, and give constructive feedback throughout the writing process with enough time to rewrite, students can be given many opportunities to succeed on their various assignments.

The foundation for a safe and rhetorical environment could emerge from the Social Contract suggested by the Flippen Group in "Capturing Kids Hearts." This program asks students to answer four specific questions with only guiding input from the classroom teacher. Students are charged with creating the classroom rules and expectations. They usually come up with basic ideals of respect and honesty, but in the end, I sign their contract as my promise to them that I will NEVER yell or laugh at them and I will ALWAYS respect them as individuals on the verge of adulthood. In return, they promise their best behavior and, more importantly, their efforts, too. Throughout the school year,

this goodwill provides me with the freedom to comment on student writing without causing students to shut down because they take the comments too personally. They understand “failure” is an obstacle on the road to flourish as writers, not an end all.

Low stakes journal writing is another option to create a rhetorical space for students. Journals are usually written in response to a quote I’ve found to match the concepts of the day, week, or unit. All journal writing is graded on participation only, since students shouldn’t feel as if their private writings are subject to harsh grading criteria (Elbow). Every once in a while, I’ll throw in a “check-in” writing assignment where students can write to me about anything they need: school or home life issues, my teaching methods, better ways we can learn from each other, etc. It is extremely important I respond to the “check-in” assignments.

Student/teacher writing conferences can occur before, during, and after every major writing assignment. Here students and I are able to discuss what students have chosen to write about and why, how they are working to accomplish their goal(s) and whether they are content with the organization and techniques in their final product. Students come to see me in a supportive facilitator role, not just as someone wielding The Red Pen of Doom which can “weaken teacher-student relations” (Dukes).

Transparent requirements can also make a difference in student engagement. Dr. Bill Broz, an Associate Professor at UTPA, offered the handout “How to Get an A in My Class” and suggested I attach it to my syllabus. These guidelines help form a rhetorical space for my writing students and myself. Students in high school are required to get a parent signature on their syllabus so they all know the expectations and requirements for my class. Public school teachers are also encouraged to keep parents abreast of their child’s attendance, behavior and grades with phone calls, emails, and home visits. Using parental support systems at the college level is frowned upon because of the Family Educational Rights Privacy Act (U.S. Department of Education), but I can still discuss this handout on the first day with my registered college students and send emails to “check-in” and gauge their dedication and ability to complete the course.

### *Method 3: Mentoring Writing Teachers and Students*

Although some schools have begun to appreciate the benefit of mentoring, there are no state or federal requirements for mandatory mentorship for writing instructors. Each college or university is free to invent a program specific for its needs. And, as previously mentioned, secondary teachers receive mentoring only through their first academic year. This freedom can craft unique results for a mission and vision; but unfortunately, many organizations have a sink-or-swim attitude when it comes to hiring new writing instructors despite knowing mastery for teaching “takes at least 10 years” (Ambrose). During this time, teachers should continuously be partnered

with a role model, engage in a professional learning communities, and participate in the “process” (Harwell) of professional development.

An often overlooked and very potent mentoring relationship is that between a teacher and student. Programs like Love and Logic or Capturing Kids Hearts promote “healthy parent/teacher and teacher/student relationships” to establish “positive . . . discipline.” Each targets a student’s emotional well-being before content is ever discussed. Although mostly used in the undergraduate setting (Colvin), peer-to-peer mentoring can also benefit students at the secondary level as they build ways to network, practice conflict resolution, and master the learning goals of the class.

## Conclusion

Out of the twenty-six standards outlined by Texas Education Agency for ELAR at the high school level, fourteen are stipulations for writing and communicating alone. At the college level, standards defined by Texas Higher Education Coordinating Board, are quite similar and just as important. If students are given multiple opportunities for authentic writing projects crafted by secondary institutions, universities, and career industries within the local community, we can all do a part to end Please-the-Teacher Syndrome and create students who can more effectively communicate with the world around them.

Students with the affliction of Please-the-Teacher Syndrome aren’t doomed to a life of not being able to write effectively. Accepting that “what the teacher wants” isn’t going to help them grow as writers, giving reasons to make writing an integral part of themselves, while providing projected based learning opportunities, students can rest assured they will no longer have to dejectedly look to their writing teacher for “what to write about.” They will have had plenty of legitimate writing opportunities between high school, post secondary, and business partners to become college and career ready.



By creating a true rhetorical space where students and I can build background knowledge, foster ideas, give constructive feedback throughout the writing process with enough time to rewrite, students can be given many opportunities to succeed on their various assignments.



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