Best Practices for Teaching Academic Writing:
A Guide for University Teachers in Japan (and Elsewhere)[1]

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Acknowledging the diverse contexts in which university lecturers teach writing, particularly in Japan, this article offers a number of "best practices" for composition pedagogy within a broad rhetorical framework. These practices advocate writing instruction as an integrated reading-researching-writing-revising process that includes—in addition to the conventional elements of brainstorming, organizing, drafting, and editing—cultivation of meta-skills and habits of mind beneficial to the long-term development of deep writing skills. While prescribing universal principles for writing instruction amounts to a theoretical and pedagogical overreach, the practical principles in this discussion are elaborated for composition instructors to adapt and adopt—and debate and discard—as fits their courses and classrooms.

1. Introduction: University Writing in a Range of Contexts

In Japan, university lecturers engage students in writing in a wide range of courses and contexts. For example, at International Christian University (ICU) in Tokyo, where Paul teaches, a writing teacher might teach a general English reading-writing course for first-year Japanese students, a general composition course for first-year European and non-Japanese Asian students, a content-based English Medium Instruction (EMI)[2] course for high proficiency Japanese students, and a research writing course for Japanese students from international or overseas high schools. At other Japanese universities, teachers may work with graduate students or offer one-to-one instruction in writing centers. Professors who include significant writing in their classes also teach in a wide variety of contexts, from small senior seminars to large subject-specific courses. Despite these differing contexts, writing teachers share common theories and practices in meeting the pedagogical challenges of academic writing as taught within a rhetorical framework.[3] While the principles and practices elaborated here will be largely familiar to teachers who focus primarily on writing, they also support courses in which writing instruction is integral to the learning and application of the core content of a course, for instance, in courses taught in the major and courses which give students foundational knowledge of a field.

In the discussion below, "writing"—and the teaching of writing in the university in particular—refers to a broad set of practices and mindsets that contemporary writing teachers typically cultivate in their students. These practices are part of a philosophy that emphasizes writing as a process (an integrated reading-researching-writing-revising process) rather than views it as a product (a finished paper). With this process approach—in addition to the brainstorming, researching, organizing, and drafting involved in composing a piece of writing—teachers stress re-writing, re-thinking, re-organizing, and further researching. Such

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[1] This article is based upon a keynote talk by the same name delivered at The 3rd International Symposium for Academic Writing & Critical Thinking, February 18, 2017, at Nagoya University.

[2] English Medium Instruction (EMI) uses English as the primary language of instruction within a classroom context that includes multi-lingual language learners.

[3] A rhetorical approach focuses not only on what a text *says* – what its words apparently communicate – but on what a text *does*; that is, what the text is doing to the reader, how it is referring to its context, and how it works to affect the reader and the context. In a general sense, rhetorical reading looks deeply at the rhetorical situation: who the writer is (his or her persona), who the audience is (who is reading and for what occasion); and what the purpose or message of the text is. Rhetorical writing then brings this knowledge to the process of creating effective written texts.

pedagogy aims to cultivate meta-skills and habits of mind that increase students' awareness of how other writers compose, to develop rhetorical reading approaches conventionally applied in their major, to encourage continual self-evaluation, and to promote awareness of their own cognitive style and time-management needs.

2. Pedagogical Practice Self-Inventory

Before continuing to the principles and practices elaborated below, please complete this brief inventory.

For students, for each essay or other major writing assignment I … (please ☑)

1 … prepare a detailed description of the assignment and the writing process I recommend to meet its goals (the planning and pre-writing tasks, the number of drafts etc.)
☐ *always*   ☐ *sometimes*   ☐ *never*

2 …illustrate the features of writing important to the genre or subject area of the assignment (such as type of structure, evidence, and style)
☐ *always*   ☐ *sometimes*   ☐ *never*

3 …present models of superior writing for the assignment (copies of similar essays written by the students in the class the year before, or examples in a textbook)
☐ *always*   ☐ *sometimes*   ☐ *never*

4 … require multiple drafts
☐ *always*   ☐ *sometimes*   ☐ *never*

5 … have students do a self-evaluation of their writing before handing it in
☐ *always*   ☐ *sometimes*   ☐ *never*

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3. Five Core Practices: Reinforcing Writing as a Process[4]

(1) Students benefit from a detailed description and open discussion of the assignment, which includes its features and goals, a recommended writing process to meet these goals, and the due dates in the process.

Even when teachers provide their students with descriptions of assignments, they may not make clear the assignments' specific expectations and evaluation criteria. A key goal is presenting expectations and practical ways to meet these expectations that are transparent and open. Ideally, students can ask questions of the process, learn how to modify it to meet their own learning styles, and interact with the teacher on an ongoing basis in order to achieve the assignment's goals.

Typically in second-language writing or writing-in-the-major courses, students experience a vast gap between what they know and what an instructor knows. This gap is pushed wider when professors take limited account of what philosopher of science Michael Polanyi calls "personal knowledge" or what might be termed as *tacit understanding* on the part of the instructor. This tacit knowledge is immense in contrast to the limited understanding of the learner. A professor will have read hundreds, even thousands of essays and articles related to his or her field—whether the field is physics or philosophy—but students will have read few and sometimes none.

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[4]   Derived from our article in *ICU Faculty Development Newsletter*, March 2009; "Best Practices in the Teaching of Writing: 10 Principles for College Faculty," *ICU Faculty Development Newsletter*, August 2016; and in extremely condensed form in *Teaching Commons*, a Stanford University forum for the development of teaching and learning.

In "Why Academics Stink at Writing," Stephen Pinker cites the failure of scholars and teachers to recognize this role of tacit understanding as a "cognitive blind spot," which he defines as the tendency for academics to "mistakenly assume that their private knowledge and skills—the words and facts they know, the puzzles they can solve, the gadgets they can operate—are second nature to everyone else, too." Tacit understanding includes evidence valued in a particular genre or subject area (from secondary research using quotations of well-known scholars to primary research using one's own fieldwork), the favored writing structure (from the lab report to the reflective essay), the expected writing style (from detached academic voice to personal narrative), and even the preferred academic documentation style (such as APA or MLA). If expectations are framed in a way that makes tacit understanding explicit, students gain direct access to that knowledge. When a teacher acknowledges that conventions shift from field to field and that experts themselves learn these conventions over time, the experience gap becomes an opportunity for learning.

Unfortunately, student habits sometimes perpetuate the gap. In their efforts to be pragmatic and task-based, students often wait until very near a deadline to get started, sometimes until the night before. If, well in advance of the due date for the final *product,* a writing teacher lays out the *process*—such as number of recommended drafts and intermediary due dates—students can use their pragmatic approach to develop an operational framework that will help them achieve the objectives of the writing task.

(2) Students learn conventions when teachers illustrate the features of writing that are important to the genre or subject area of the assignment, such as structure, evidence, and style.

This second principle is related to the first (the need for detailed description and open discussion of assignments*)* but is more explicit. In cultivating an awareness of how a thesis-driven essay must develop a coherent discussion around a central assertion, for example, teachers can ask students to underline the thesis statement in the introduction. This simple requirement may sharply improve the quality of an essay because student-writers are directed—at the outset—to identify the main point they are arguing. In Japan, this practice helps students recognize that the underlying rhetorical form of the English academic essay differs from the traditional Japanese persuasive essay that withholds the thesis and viewpoint of the author until the very end. Moreover, even when students have received extensive instruction in thesis statement writing during earlier English composition courses, scholarship in composition studies has shown that it is normal for developing writers, when under stress, to revert back to the default of their writing before any college instruction (called "reversion to default"). Put differently, there is a natural tendency for students under time and task stress to "forget what they've learned"—from writing in an introduction-body-conclusion structure to using transitions and topic sentences. To use an extreme example, one of our colleagues told us an initial draft of a senior thesis she had received was a single continuous text for 50 pages with no paragraphs.

When teachers take time in class and in assignments to spell out the expected features of a piece of writing, they can reinforce expectations by having students identify these features with special marking in their drafts. For example, they can indicate Introduction-Body-Conclusion with subheadings. If teachers expect supporting evidence from a number and a variety of sources, students may handwrite in the number of the source in the margin next to the references. For evidence of a particular kind, such as close reading of a text in a law or a literature course, teachers might showcase in class or in a handout the kind of analysis they expect student writers to undertake. Finally, when teachers know students have previously taken writing courses in their university, they might use a copy of the students' previous textbook to have them re-read relevant portions that focus on key features. Even if students only skim their previous writing textbook it will help reduce the reversion-to-default tendency, help them recall what they've already learned, and reinforce expectations.

(3) Students discover one of the truths of good writing—the role of revision—when it is incorporated into the writing process.

All professors know that good writing is rewriting, and almost nothing of real value is composed in an all-nighter before an assignment is due. Yet even professional writers and seasoned scholars tend to be

deadline-driven. It is hardly surprising that students' typical writing mode and default assumption about writing from high school is to wait until just before the paper is due and throw themselves into an intense marathon session. Writing teachers need to practice shrewd coaching techniques to boost motivation for students whose interests and commitments pull them in several directions at once.

a. Teachers with smaller seminars can set up a cycle of several drafts that they read and respond to before the final product is due.

b. Teachers with larger classes or heavier course loads can arrange a three- or four-class cycle for writing assignments. For the first class, students hand in drafts which are immediately redistributed to their classmates for peer feedback[5]; for the second class, students hand in drafts to allow teachers a quick review of peer feedback comments (in larger classes, this process may allow a teacher simply to check to see if the peer review was completed, and even this cursory check will encourage stronger drafts); during the third class, essays are returned to the authors for revision; and during the next class, such as after a weekend, students hand in fully revised final versions. Although teachers may have read the drafts only once (at the end of the process), their quality will be far higher than in a one-draft sequence, and students will have learned more from the process.

c. Even this series of steps may consume more time than teachers can afford (especially in English Medium Instruction courses). In this case, having students submit a draft in advance, and then simply requiring a second improved draft a few classes later, will motivate investment in the writing process.

(4) Students develop deeper understanding of a writing assignment and how to achieve its goals when immersed in models of superior writing, such as copies of similar essays written by the students in the class the year before or examples in a textbook.

An example is worth a thousand words—or maybe it "is" a thousand words. This practice is an extension of Principle 2—illustrating the features of writing that are important in the assignment. It shows students not only that the assignment *can* be done, but *how* it can be done. It also demonstrates that students just like them *have* done it. To obtain these exemplars, teachers can ask permission from individual students to use their essays as models, a request which honors the achievement of a developing writer. These models can be distributed in hard copy or posted as Google Docs with instructor annotations included for other students to examine as reference points. Stanford's Program in Writing and Rhetoric (PWR) formalizes this practice across the curriculum by having teachers each term nominate their students' essays for a prize and then publishing and archiving the winners for students in future courses to refer to. All teachers in the PWR program can cite these essays as models.

Such exemplar essays can also be incorporated into the course as reading materials for an English Medium Instruction or research writing course so that their importance is highlighted by their inclusion in the syllabus and students can strategically read and discuss the texts just prior to undertaking the same kind of writing themselves.

(5) Students take ownership of their work when they self-assess their writing just before turning it in.

Designing a self-assessment cover sheet for students to include with their completed projects is another effective pedagogical practice. Given the diversity of fields and personal preferences of professors, this self-assessment motivates students to see how learning about writing transfers from course to course, and reinforces expectations in organization, argumentation, evidence, mechanics, formatting, and style that may be specific to a discipline or a teacher. Moreover, as students reflect upon—and check off—the features through self-assessment, they increase understanding of the shortcomings and strengths of their own writing for application in future writing. Miguel Sosa, an experienced second-language writing teacher at Akita

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[5]   A brief description of one model of student peer review, or peer review groups, has been included in the appendix.

International University observes, "no writing should be viewed with finality but only as one's 'Current Best Effort.'" Self-assessment helps students appraise and appreciate their Current Best Efforts or CBE.

4. Five Additional Practices (Plus One More): Supporting the Core Principles
(6) Students are more motivated when given some choice in theme and the possibility of connecting their writing with other courses they are taking.

Even professional writers find it difficult to write about topics they don't care much about or are unfamiliar with. Students learn more and write better when they follow their own intellectual interests. Rather than assigning overly restrictive writing that requires a specific argument or analysis, teachers motivate students by encouraging them to pursue their curiosity and their questions within a broader theme, or an "umbrella topic" under which students can find several ways to reach the course objectives. In general, problem-solving and curiosity-driven assignments, rather than the compiling of information, tend to sustain students' attentions and result in better research and writing. In addition, students can build on their overall learning when invited to write essays that permit them to make connections *between* their courses. These connections help them start with some knowledge and sources rather than beginning from scratch. Some of the best scholarly investigation is a result of synthesis—grappling with knowledge and issues in two related fields. Students instinctively believe that writing an essay related to two courses they are taking may be "cheating," and certainly submitting the same exact work for two different courses is unacceptable. However, encouraging students to make connections and use readings from one course to support writing in another often results in richer, deeper, and more complex inquiry.

(7) *Particularly for English Medium Instruction (EMI) and Writing in the Major (WIM) courses, students need explicit guidance in using relevant databases and reference works for a given field.*

Students greatly benefit from instruction on the specific databases and foundational sources for a particular discipline, along with supporting assignments which give them practice using these resources. Most university libraries have reference rooms with up-to-date, subject-specific encyclopedias in almost every major field—such as *The Encyclopedia of Sex and Gender*, *The Encyclopedia of Globalization*, *The Blackwell Encyclopedia of Management*, and *The Encyclopedia of Terrorism*—but students seldom use them because they don't know they are in the library and tend to equate research with general internet searches. Students also under-utilize specialized databases available through web-based library gateways. From ERIC in education to JSTOR in arts and sciences to LION in literature, library databases provide valuable research tools, but students are unlikely to take advantage of them if instructors do not offer direct guidance. Since they are taking courses in many different disciplines, they often do not have the personal, tacit knowledge to access the specialized resources in a particular field.

(8) *Students are overwhelmed when many of their instructors schedule major writing assignments for the very end of the term or during major university events.*

Normal practice for teachers across the university is to have term papers and other major writing assignments due the last day of class or even during exam week. Due to all of the competing assignments and impending tests, students are hindered in producing their best work at the end of a term. Other periods to avoid for major writing assignments are weeks when mid-term exams are scheduled, or during or just after big university events—such as the school festival at Japanese universities in November or during homecoming weekends at American universities. Students lead busy lives, take multiple courses, and pursue meaningful activities outside of class; teachers can help them perform optimally in their writing and succeed in their academic aspirations by being conscious of some of the other dimensions of their lives and the scheduling demands being made upon.

(9) Students benefit when teachers identify some of their sentence errors but do not individually correct all of them.

Andrea Lunsford, a leading international scholar in rhetoric and composition at Stanford who for nearly thirty years has directed far-reaching studies of error in college students, points out that making errors is a part of learning to write in increasingly complex ways.[6] In other words, lower-level, superficial errors may increase while higher level, conceptual writing becomes more advanced. A great deal of research in composition demonstrates that correcting discrete grammar mistakes seldom leads to long-term improvement. Rather than individually correcting mistakes, some teachers underline the part of a sentence in which an error occurs and have the students themselves identify—and then correct—the mistake at hand. This practice encourages first, cognitive awareness of the existence of the error and second, manual performance of the correction; these responses together *do tend* to result in long-term improvement. Selectively identifying *types* or *patterns* of error, rather than marking all mistakes, also results in more effective learning. When teachers group students to work on these processes together, students learn readily by identifying each other's errors, and the process of correcting a classmate's errors can improve one's own writing as well. In particular, two practices to avoid are exhaustively identifying all errors in an essay and basing grading on the number of errors. These practices can induce debilitating stress, cognitively overwhelm students, and deeply discourage investment in writing and revision, resulting in poorer rather than better performance.

One time-honored practice used even by the most experienced writers is reading drafts out loud in order to polish grammar and word choice and catch typographical errors. Students often do not think to employ this practice of oral reading and listening to sharpen their prose. In addition, the emerging technology of online grammar checkers is beginning to show promise. Student use of online resources to support their learning is becoming more common, and they will often explore and apply one or more programs, such as grammarly, ginger.com, onlinecorrection.com, afterthedeadline, or the MS Word spelling and grammar checkers, if they know these applications will help them improve sentence variety and reduce grammar errors. Basic or trial versions of most of these platforms are free.

(10) Students are motivated and rewarded when teachers showcase their successful writing.

After each writing assignment, a writing teacher can pick out several of the outstanding essays or reports and project them onscreen for classroom use, pointing out successful writing. This public sharing often works best when the authors' names are not visible, which minimizes social distraction brought on by awareness of author. By pointing out methods of analysis, clearly explained content, and persuasive reasoning, teachers help students read for inspiration to motivate their writing craft. While students indeed learn from their own trial and error, they often have little basis for comparison and a limited knowledge base for building understanding. Seeing the successes of their classmates enriches their own experience and allows them to glimpse writing they are—or should be—aspiring to. Moreover, seeing peers rewarded for the accomplishment of their hard work spurs student motivation for the next writing task. Stanford's Program in Writing and Rhetoric formalizes this process by publishing a hardbound anthology of outstanding work written each year in first-year courses; these Boothe Prize Essays are accessible on the Program's website (Stanford 2016). In subsequent years, students access these essays online and refer to them as exemplars. International Christian University's College of Liberal Arts recognizes outstanding senior theses and makes them accessible in the library to other undergraduates. Recognition of quality writing within the class in which it occurs may even be more effective: it heightens motivation and sets in motion a virtuous cycle during the course of the term.

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[6] Lunsford's research studies and articles in this area are too numerous to list here, but among the most comprehensive and most accessible is "'Mistakes Are a Fact of Life': A National Comparative Study" (Lunsford and Lunsford 2008).

(11) Share your own writing—both product and process—with your students (one last suggestion).

Few readings are more meaningful to students than the actual writings of their own professors because these humanize us, demonstrate that we practice what we preach, and connect us as teacher and student in the classroom. Handing out copies of your published articles, or even better, showing on an overhead screen portions of a piece you are struggling with at that very moment has immense educational value. Sharing the daunting process of writing-researching-revising—the wrong direction taken, the effort to find better proof, the organizational stumble along the way—shows students that even for "experts" like their teachers writing is an ongoing challenge, a struggle that reflects their own Current Best Effort, and demonstrates the striving by which insight is gained and knowledge is made. Last year, we co-authored an article in the Japan News of *The Yomiuri Shimbun* on the growing pressure for the vocationalization of education in both Japan and the United States and we emphasized what we feel is the far more pressing need for greater access to liberal arts and whole-person education in both countries. In our writing courses at ICU and Stanford, we then asked students to read and critique our article, to offer suggestions for how we could improve and expand the piece, particularly for a different forum such as *The Atlantic*, and we offered our own self-critique for how we could make the piece better. Showing how writing is rewriting, how proficient writers constantly revise and improve their work, and how for all of us even our most finished work is only the best we can do for that moment captivated our students and led to some very good advice from them about what to include in a longer more comprehensive version of our article in a different rhetorical forum.

5. Limitations

The principles and practices outlined above pose a comprehensive set of methods to engage students in ongoing efforts to improve their writing. For students who are constantly moving into new writing situations across a broad spectrum of academic expectations, developing a stable set of practices may seem at times futile, and our tendency is to want to give them sweeping truisms that will reassure them. Unfortunately, academics sometimes rely on a persistent myth that there exists some tacit set of universal rules that underlies all scholarly writing. We do not intend here to reinforce that myth by offering our own set of rules that appear to reduce a complex web of practices and sub-practices to easily manageable guidelines. We acknowledge that limitation here.

In a larger sense, the problem of *transfer of learning*, the challenge of taking knowledge learned in one context and applying it to a different context, is at the heart of the challenge of writing instruction. It is important to remember that the conventions we have internalized over many years of scholarship and teaching do not always directly transfer to each new academic situation students will inevitably encounter. Our approach emphasizes *writing as a process* and *writing as a rhetorical and situated act*, with expectations and conventions that shift from situation to situation; yet, we offer a set of practices that may be flexible enough to work within some of these limitations. By accepting the contextual limitations of any set of rules, we can also frame our pedagogy to meet the diverse range of preparation our students bring to the classroom.

6. Conclusion (So Then What?)

Our conclusion is short and relatively simple. In addition to considering the pedagogical principles we outline above, we recommend that teachers particularly cultivate
- self-awareness of their teaching practice and pedagogy
- further DYO (design your own) principles which are student-centered and teacher-empowered
- ways to encourage attitudes, habits of mind, and composing practices that help students succeed over the long term in their writing

We would also finally like to recall, as Hemingway observed, that when it comes to writing, "We are all apprentices in a craft where no one ever becomes a master." And, considering all of the suggestions and

recommendations we have made throughout this article, would like to end with Carl Sandburg's advice about writing: "Beware of advice—even this."

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