The War between Reading and Writing—
And How To End It

We tend to assume that reading and writing fit naturally together: love and marriage, horse and carriage. It is a commonplace that the very best thing for writing is to read a great deal—and it seems as though those students who write best are readers. But when we see things in binary pairs, one side usually ends up on top—privileged or dominant: love and marriage, man and woman. I will argue that this is true here too and that reading has dominance over writing in the academic or school culture. But my main point in this essay is that the imbalance is unnecessary. Reading and writing can work productively together as equals to benefit each other and the profession. Both parties can be on top. We can create a better balance and relationship between reading and writing. To do so we will need to give more emphasis to writing in our teaching and our curricular structures and use writing in more imaginative ways. When we achieve this productive balance, even reading will benefit.

There are four sections here: (1) Sites of conflict between reading and writing; (2) How reading is privileged over writing; (3) Benefits of ending this privilege; (4) How to end the war and create a more productive interaction between reading and writing.

1. Sites of Conflict between Reading and Writing

Gerald Graff wrote a whole book about the conflicts in the English profession and chose to ignore the most striking and problematic conflict of all: that between reading and writing—between literature and composition (Friend).

The conflict of interest between reading and writing shows itself most clearly perhaps in the question of authority. From ancient times on, authors were the source of ‘author’-ity—and it was the reader’s job to find out what the author intended to say. Someone who could establish himself as “writer” or “author” (and it was usually “he”) was felt to be special—even as seer or oracle. Thus people often sought out authors or writers in order to hear their pronouncements on all sorts of matters (thus the phenomenon of “table talk”).

In recent times readers have battled back successfully to take authority for themselves. The New Critics convinced much of the profession that the author’s intention didn’t matter. Deconstructive theorists convinced much of the profession
that even the concept of meaning in a text is problematic. Roland Barthes speaks of the death of the author giving rise to the birth of the reader; he characterizes the reader as alive and sexy and full of energy, and the "scriptor" as pallid and lacking in juice.

The most specific focus of contention is over who gets authority over the meaning of a text. Take my own text here as an example. I get to decide what I intended to say. You get to decide what you understand me to say. But as for what I actually did say—what meanings are "in" my text—that is a site of contention between us. We see this fight everywhere, from the law courts to literary criticism to the bedrooms: "But I said . . ." / "No you didn't, you said . . ."

So the interests of the contending parties are clear. It's in the interest of readers to say that writers' intentions don't matter or are unfindable, to say that meaning is never determinate, always fluid and sliding, to say that there is no presence or voice behind a text—and finally to kill off the author. This leaves the reader in complete control of the text.

It's in the interest of writers, on the other hand, to say that their intentions are central—to have readers actually interested in what was on writers' minds, what they intended to say. As writers we often fail to be clear, but it helps us if readers have some faith that our authorial meanings and intentions can be found. If I am lost in the woods, you have a better chance of finding me if you think I am actually there. And it goes without saying that writers are interested in not being killed off. (Even critics who celebrate the death of the author are likely to get irritated when readers completely misread what they have written.)

Writers also have interest in ownership of the text—and, as with "killing," I want to take this metaphor literally. Writers have a interest in monetary payment for their labor. But of course the figurative psychological meaning is more pervasive. Writers feel ownership. People sometimes like to say now that the sense of individual ownership over words is only a recent, modern phenomenon, but even Chaucer in the fourteenth century wrote into his poem a plea to copyists please not to "miswrite" his words in copying the text.

Listen to the dismay of Toni Morrison on this point:

Whole schools of criticism have dispossessed the writer of any place whatever in the critical value of his work. Ideas, craft, vision, meaning—all of them are just so much baggage in these critical systems. . . . The political consequences for minority writers, dissident writers and writers committed to social change are devastating. For it means that there is no way to talk about what we mean, because to mean anything is not in vogue. (Sanders 25)

Here is Scott Russell Sanders commenting on her statement:
Rightly or wrongly, many of us who make novels and stories and poems feel that the net effect of recent theorizing has been to turn the writer into a puppet, one whose strings are jerked by some higher power—by ideology or the unconscious, by ethnic allegiance, by sexual proclivities, by gender, by language itself. We may wade through Derrida and Adorno and de Man, we may read Harold Bloom and J. Hillis Miller and Stanley Fish, or we may simply hear rumors of what they and their innumerable followers are up to; whether at first or second hand, we learn that to regard ourselves as conscious, purposeful, responsible artists is a delusion; we learn that material conditions or neuroses control us; we learn that our efforts at making sense are doomed to failure; we learn that our words, like Zeno’s forlorn rabbit, will never reach their destination. (25)

Am I only telling a story of readers privileging themselves over writers? No, writers privileged themselves over readers long before the intentional fallacy was a gleam in the eye of Wimsatt and Beardsley. Writers often say, “What do readers know? My toughest audience—sometimes my main audience—is me. For some pieces, I don’t even care whether readers understand or appreciate my efforts.” So perhaps it’s not surprising that readers have finally retaliated with a modern doctrine that says, “What do writers know? We can read the text better than they can. Intention is a will o’ the wisp. Never trust the teller, trust the tale.” In short, where writers are tempted to think they are the most important party in the transaction, readers and academics are tempted to think they are the most important party (Wallace).

Just as children think their parents should always have them in mind, many modern readers think that writers should always have them in mind. When readers are teachers (and most teachers think of themselves more as readers than as writers), they tell students, “You must always keep us in mind as you write.” And if student writing is weak, they diagnose “writer-based prose!” and assume that the student stopped thinking about them—when in fact the problem was probably that the student was too preoccupied with the teacher-reader. When readers are theorists (and most theorists also think of themselves more as readers than as writers), they often completely contradict that teacherly advice and declare, “There is no such thing as writing without readers in mind—no such thing as private writing. If you thought you were not thinking about us and just writing privately in your journal for yourself alone, you were fooling yourself. You are never not thinking about us.” (See, for example, Harris 66.)

But writers, like parents, tend to insist on time away from the imperious demands of readers. Writers know they need some time when they can just forget about readers and think about themselves. Yes, writers must finally acknowledge
the humbling truth that, in the end, readers get to decide whether their words will be read or bought—just as parents have to accept that, in the end, the child’s interests must come first. But smart writers and parents know that they do a better job of serving these demanding creatures if they take some time for themselves.

I hope it’s clear that this reader/writer conflict isn’t just theoretical. I feel it quite concretely in my teaching—especially in a writing course for first-year students. Yes, ideally I want my students to feel themselves as both writers and readers. But my pressing hunger to help them feel themselves as writers makes me notice the conflict. That is, I want my students to have some of that uppitiness of writers toward readers—to be able to talk back—to say, “I’m not just writing for readers or teachers, I’m writing as much for me—sometimes even more for me.” I want them to fight back a bit against readers.

Let me point to another conflict of interests between writers and readers: a conflict over the relationship between language and knowledge. Writers frequently testify to the experience of knowing more than they can say, of knowing things that they haven’t yet been able to get into words. Readers on the other hand, (especially when they are also teachers or academics), being mostly on the receiving end of texts, are often tempted to put forth the doctrine that all knowledge is linguistic, that there is nothing we can know outside of language: “If you can’t say it, you don’t know it” (Emerson 219).

Again, this isn’t just theoretical. Paying better attention to the inarticulate—having more respect for the nonverbal—often leads writers to the articulate. Most of my own progress in learning to write has come from my gradually learning to listen more carefully to what I haven’t yet managed to get into words—waiting and trying to feel better my nonverbal feelings and intentions—and respecting the idea that I know more than I can say. This stance helps me be willing to find time and energy to tease into language what the phenomenologist Eugene Gendlin calls my “felt bodily sense.” The most unhelpful thing I’ve had said to me as a student and writer is, “If you can’t say it, you don’t know it.” Not surprisingly, painters, musicians, and dancers are more than a little amused at the odd dogma that all knowledge is linguistic—that if you can’t say it in language you don’t know it and it doesn’t count as knowledge.

I want to call attention to some very central pedagogical implications of this point about language and meaning—a point that writers often understand and readers and academics and teachers often do not. The main thing that helps writers is to be understood. Pointing out what we don’t understand is only the second need. In my teaching, I find it helpful to assume that I often can hear intentions that are not really articulated. Yes, I’ll point out where these intentions are badly realized, but if my goal is to make students feel like writers, my highest priority is to show that I’ve understood what they’re saying. It’s only my second priority to show them where I had to struggle.
I see a third conflict between readers and writers these days: over whether to trust language. Again let me describe the conflict in terms of my own teaching. If my goal is to get my first-year students to take on the role of reader, I should constantly try to get them to distrust language. For it is a central tenet of intellectual and academic thinking in this century that words are not a clear and neutral window through which we can see undistorted nonlinguistic things.

Of course I acknowledge the merit in this skeptical view of language. Nevertheless, if I want to help my students experience themselves as writers, I find I must help them trust language—not question it—or at least not question it for long stretches of the writing process till they have managed to generate large structures of language and thinking. Some people say this is good advice only for inexperienced and blocked writers, but I think I see it enormously helpful to myself and to other adult, skilled, and professional writers. Too much distrust often stops people from coming up with interesting hypotheses and from getting things written. Striking benefits usually result when people learn that decidedly unacademic capacity to turn off distrust of language and instead not to see it, to look through it as through a clear window, and focus all attention on the objects or experiences one is trying to articulate. Let me quote a distinguished poet and writer, William Stafford, about the need to trust language and one’s experience:

Just as any reasonable person who looks at water, and passes a hand through it, can see that it would not hold a person up; so it is the judgment of common sense people that reliance on the weak material of students’ experiences cannot possibly sustain a work of literature. But swimmers know that if they relax on the water it will prove to be miraculously buoyant; and writers know that a succession of little strokes on the material nearest them—without any prejudgments about the specific gravity of the topic or the reasonableness of their expectations—will result in creative progress. Writers are persons who write; swimmers are (and from teaching a child I know how hard it is to persuade a reasonable person of this)—swimmers are persons who relax in the water, let their heads go down, and reach out with ease and confidence.

... [M]y main plea is for the value of an unafraid, face-down, flailing, and speedy process in using the language. (22-23)

For the last site of conflict between reading and writing (and an intriguing one), let’s look at what’s called “invisible writing.” A couple of decades ago, James Britton and colleagues (35ff) were interested in how important it is for writers to get that literal, short-term feedback of simply seeing what they are writing. They demonstrated this by artificially taking it away. That is, they tried writing with spent ballpoint pens so they couldn’t see what they were writing (but putting carbon paper
and another sheet underneath the page they were writing on). Sure enough, they felt stymied and their writing fell apart. But then Sheridan Blau replicated the experiment many times—and showed in virtually every case that students and professionals were not significantly harmed by ten- and twenty-minute stretches of what he called “invisible writing” (despite some initial frustration). Indeed, students often produced better pieces in various modes or genres under these conditions (Blau). His explanation of the phenomenon seems right to me from my own trials of invisible writing: when you can’t see what you are writing, you are almost automatically forced into a much greater focus of attention and energy on what you are trying to say—on the meaning and intention in your mind. And you can’t stop and worry; you must forge on.

What these experiments show is the odd fact that normal writing is really both-writing-and-reading. Invisible writing stamps out the reading we normally do as we write, and forces us to engage in nothing-but-writing—with a consequent boost of concentration and intensity of mind. Thus invisible writing is strikingly helpful with a common problem: finding ourselves stalled in our writing and spending most of our so-called writing time sitting and reading back over what we have already written. Word processors make invisible writing very easy: just turn down the screen.

2. How Reading Is Privileged over Writing

Most schools and colleges emphasize reading and neglect writing. An investigation of English classes in secondary schools has found that students spend less than 3 percent of their class and homework time devoted to writing a paragraph or more—and most of the “writing” time in class consists of writing short-answer exercises (Appleby).

In most school and college courses, reading is more central than writing. Even in English departments there is usually only one writing course—some kind of “freshman writing.” Sometimes there is a sprinkling of creative writing or other advanced writing courses—but even when these are given, they are available to comparatively few students. Other departments (except for journalism) typically have no writing courses.

Of course writing is assigned in a fair number of courses (though some students in large universities learn to avoid much writing for their whole college career). But when writing is assigned, it is traditionally meant to serve reading: to summarize, interpret, explain, or make integrations and comparisons among readings. In the last couple of years, there has even been a widespread move to change the first-year writing course into a reading-and-writing course, even though it is usually the only writing course—the only place in the entire curriculum where writing is emphasized more than reading. In every other course in the university, reading is privileged, and writing, when used at all, is used to serve reading.
I won’t try to analyze here the complicated historical and cultural reasons why we have this imbalance, but I can’t resist mentioning one interesting hypothesis (Laurence). If we assign much writing, we find ourselves positively awash in what is admittedly discouraging or depressing: our students’ thinking and feeling—with all its naïveté, its appearance of reflecting nothing but brainwashing by the shallowest pop culture. We can spare ourselves from any real immersion in extensive student thinking and feeling about our topic if we assign mostly reading, if we use carefully focused topics on the few occasions when we do assign writing, and if we fill up our classes with lectures or carefully controlled discussions. Howard Gardner points out in his most recent book that good teaching and learning seldom happen unless we understand and acknowledge and learn to deal with what is really happening in students’ minds.

The dominance of reading has produced some powerful political and economic consequences for higher education. It is fairly common for English departments to “live off” writing teachers—paying them poorly, denying them the possibility of tenure, and providing poor working conditions, in order to give tenure, much better pay, and a lighter teaching load for teachers of reading or literature. People who teach writing are apt to be TAs or nontenure track lecturers or adjunct part-timers who must piece together jobs at two or three institutions, and are often paid less than $1,000 per course—with no benefits. They often don’t know if they’ll be hired till a month or a week before the term begins—sometimes, in fact, only after the semester has started. (James Slevin lays out these conditions in more detail and makes an interesting argument about the reasons for the imbalance.)

Let me turn from the outward material conditions of employment to the inward premises of our thinking. That is, the relationship between reading and writing in most school and college courses enacts a kind of root metaphor or originary story of our culture: that we hear and read before we speak and write—that input precedes output. This seems a natural story: babies and children seem to hear before they can speak—to listen before they answer. But it’s not so simple. Yes, children wouldn’t speak unless they grew up in the presence of other speakers, and of course babies and children usually answer when spoken to. But careful observation of children suggests that it works the other way round too: the reason why children get input—hear language—is often that they initiate the “conversation.” Even when a baby gives as little as a gurgle or a coo, parents often take it as the initiation of discourse (which it sometimes is), and respond. Babies don’t just read the textbook and listen to lectures and then answer questions; sometimes they start the conversation. Babies often “write” before they “read.”

I suspect that the child’s initiation of speech is as important or more so in learning to talk than the initiation by others. That is, the adult’s enabling act is as much listening and understanding and answering as it is starting a conversation. The most productive and generative act by a teacher or parent is often to listen. In
short, most parents instinctively know that their job is to get children to start with output, not input—start with writing, not reading.

But the relationship between reading and writing in schools and universities belies this instinctive wisdom of parents. Our very conception of what it is to learn privileges reading over writing because that concept has been shaped by the same root metaphor: *learning is input*—“taking things in”—putting things inside us. People think of the root activities in school as listening and reading, not talking and writing. Of course when we stop and think about it, we realize that students learn from output—talking and writing—but we don’t naturally think of learning as talking and writing. Notice, for example, how many teachers think of testing as measuring input, not output. Tests tend to ask, in effect, “How well have you learned the ideas of others?” not “What new ideas of your own do you have?”

Even if we grant that, more often than not, input precedes output, and that we usually speak and write in response to what we hear and read, we must still beware a claim that some people make today: that all writing is in response to text or textuality. This is not a fair translation of Bakhtin’s insight about the ubiquity of voices. When people fixate on a theoretical dictum that all writing is in response to texts, they paper over a concrete and indeed political distinction: the distinction between asking students to write in response to our texts and lectures versus asking them to write in response to their own ideas and experience (even if their ideas and experience are made up of texts and voices already inside their heads). Even if we were to take it as our main goal to show students that what they experience as their own ideas and voices are really ideas and voices from outside them, our best strategy would be to get them to write extensively about something before reading any new texts about it. That is the best way to make visible all the voices that are already jampacked inside their heads.

Why is it that our profession stresses so much the *reading* of imaginative writing—fiction and poetry and drama—while neglecting the writing of it? Most of us got into the field not only because we loved to read imaginative writing but also because we liked to write it—often harboring wishes to be writers. But as adult professionals, we tend to run away from it. We seldom write it or ask our students to write it. Can we really say we understand something we never try to engage in? We should surely require PhD candidates at least to *try their hand* at the kind of writing they profess to understand and hope to teach.

I’ve had an interesting glimpse into the archaeology of this fear of writing in literature professors. Whenever I teach any graduate course in writing, I ask students to write case studies of themselves as writers: to look back through their lives at what they’ve written and to figure out as much as they can about how they went about writing and what was going on—to try to see all the forces at play. I’ve noticed a striking feature that is common in literature students that I don’t much see in graduate students from other disciplines: a wry and sometimes witty but always condescending tone they take toward their younger selves who were usually
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excited with writing and eager to be great writers. Behind this urbanity I often see a good deal of disappointment and even pain at not being able to keep on writing those stories and poems that were so exciting to write. But instead of acknowledging this disappointment, these students tend to betray a frightening lack of kindness or charity—most of all a lack of understanding—toward that younger self who wanted to grow up to be Yeats or Emily Dickinson. Instead, I see either amused condescension or downright ridicule at their former idealism and visionary zeal. My point is that no one can continue to engage in writing without granting herself some vision and idealism and even naïve grandstanding. Yet these literature students, now that they see themselves on the path to being professors of literature—that is professors of reading—seem to need to squelch any sense of themselves as writers.

Even in MFA programs, which are devoted to writing and which are sometimes even guilty of neglecting reading, we see an odd but powerful ritual that privileges readers over writers: the so-called “gag rule.” It is standard in workshops that writers must be silent and only readers may speak. That is, writers must refrain from the most natural thing that they might want to do, namely to specify the kinds of response they need from readers or the issues they want readers to explore. (This pervasive custom seems to derive from the early Iowa workshops, and perhaps has definite gender associations of writers as “tough guys who can take it.”)

Notice how the dominance of reading over writing is embedded in our language. The word literacy really means power over letters, i.e., reading and writing. But as literacy is used casually and even in government policy and legislation, it tends to mean reading, not writing. Similarly, the word learning tends to connote reading and input—not writing and output. Finally the very words academic or professor or even teacher tend to connote a reader and critic, not a writer. Thus deeply has the dominance of reading infected our ways of thinking.

I can conclude this section by making it clear that I am not arguing against reading—against the importance and special value of reading and listening: only against privileging them over writing and speaking. Reading and listening are precious for the very ways they are different from writing and speaking. They are precious because they ask us to step outside our own preoccupations and hear what others have to say, to think in the language of others, to recognize authority of others without letting it overwhelm us, and above all to relinquish some control. I hope that my long advocacy of the believing game (1973) or methodological belief (1986) will show that I don’t slight this side of our intellectual life.

Nor am I trying to imply that students are already good at reading and listening. Far from it. Yes, learning means getting inside someone else’s language and thinking, taking in ideas, indeed taking in lists of brute facts—and getting them right. But I suspect that part of students’ difficulty with reading stems from the ingrained educational pattern I’m pointing to here: It’s always, “Read first and then write to see if you got it right. What they have to say is more important than what
you have to say.” Reading and listening might go better if we sometimes said, “Let’s start with what you have to say. Then we’ll see if the reading can respond to it and serve it.” I find it common for people to be more interested in a subject and able to take in more new material about it if they first work out their own thinking about it.

3. Benefits of Ending This Privilege

What if we undid the imbalance? The benefits would be considerable. If we gave more centrality to writing, it would help out with an important and vexing problem in the teaching of reading itself. That is, we often have difficulty getting students to see how the meaning of a text is actively created and negotiated—not just found as an inert right answer sitting there hidden in the text or in the teacher’s mind or in a work of authoritative criticism. “Yes,” we say to our students, “the text puts some constraints on our reading. Not any interpretation is acceptable. Nevertheless the resulting meaning is something that readers have to build and negotiate.” This lesson is all the harder to teach because students sometimes flop over into the opposite misunderstanding of reading: “Well this is what I think the poem means, and nothing you can say will change my mind. Literature is just a matter of personal opinion.”

Reading can learn from writing here. Writing involves physical actions that are much more outward and visible than reading does. As a result, it’s easier to see how meaning is slowly constructed, negotiated, and changed in writing than it is in reading. The erasing, crossing out, and changing of words as we write is much more visible than the erasing, crossing out, and changing of words that do in fact go on as we read—but more quickly and subliminally. Students can see evidence of the same process in the messy manuscripts and revisions even of famous published authors. And we usually experience the construction of meaning more vividly, even painfully, when we write than when we read. Most writing teachers now try to set up their classes so that students can experience how written meaning is constructed through a process of thinking, generating trial text, revision, and social negotiation with peers and teachers. It seems to me then that writing is the most helpful paradigm we have for teaching what may be the central process in our profession and what we most want to convey to students: the way meaning in both reading and writing is constructed and negotiated.

By the way, because the reading process is so quick and hidden, it seems less fraught with struggle for people who are skilled. Therefore, literature teachers often fail to experience themselves in the same boat or engaged in the same process as their unskilled students. When it comes to writing, however, almost all teachers experience the common bond of struggle or even anxiety, no matter how good they are. Writing is a leveler.

But students could come to see reading as a “process” of cognitive and social construction if only there were a tradition in literature, as there is in writing, of teachers and researchers sharing what we might call “rough drafts of reading”: 
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showing or talking about their actual reading process from the beginning—for example by working with colleagues or students on texts they have not seen before; giving an honest protocol or an accurate account of the mental events that go on in one’s mind while engaged in creating meaning from a text. I like to call this giving “movies of the reader’s mind.” If there were more widespread attention to this sharing of our own reading processes, we’d spend more time talking to our colleagues and to our students about how of course we misread and misunderstand an enormous number of words and phrases and sections of a text as we engage in even the most skilled reading. That is, the mysterious innerness of reading isn’t just because good readers “revise” and correct themselves so quickly and often subliminally; it’s also because there’s no tradition of revealing misreadings and wrong takes (like sharing early drafts). Where the writing tradition of the last two decades shows teachers how to write with students and share what they produce in its raw crummy state, the literary tradition tells literature teachers that it would be wrong to teach a class on a text that they have not carefully studied and mastered beforehand; and that it would be odd to have a discussion with colleagues about a text they’ve never seen before. Reading becomes vivid and alive in classes where everyone, even teachers, reveals early rough “readings” in process, and shows how these are adjusted and transformed over time and by means of negotiation through comparison with readings by others.

One of the virtues of reader-response criticism is that if people really engage in it honestly and empirically, it tends to make them braver about the kind of exploring I’ve just described. It promotes professionalism in the good sense (nondefensive thinking together) and undermines professionalism in the bad sense (trying to hide your struggles and to erase bonds with the unwashed). I’m suspicious of the fact that reader-response criticism has gone so deeply out of fashion in literary criticism. I know there are lots of culturally sophisticated reasons, but frankly, I think a lot of it can be explained this way: critics began to stumble onto a critical method that required giving naked accounts of what was actually happening inside them as they read—and decided to back away from the process.

If writing were more central, it would also help in the assessment of writing. The field of composition has managed to convince schools and colleges that testing means testing a practice or a performance, not a content: that if we want to find out how well students write, we’ve got to get them to write—despite budgetary pressures and the blandishments of cheaper tests of grammar and usage from ETS and ACT. In the case of literature, however, virtually every school, college, and university in the country accedes to ETS and ACT testing of literature and reading by means of multiple-choice, machine-graded tests—many of them tests of correct information. (Of course colleges have mostly gone along with the ETS decision to omit required writing in SAT II, but that wasn’t a decision to trust multiple-choice tests of writing ability, it was a decision to forego trustworthy knowledge of writing ability. Indeed this decision was deeply influenced by an argument in the other
direction: “minority students’ writing ability will not be measured fairly if there is only a 20-minute writing sample—with the attendant overdetermination by dialect cues.) We see some of the same difference between writing and reading if we look at teachers’ course exams: it has come to feel peculiar if the final exam in a writing course asks mostly for recall of ideas and information—whereas that does not seem peculiar in many literature courses.

Another benefit of emphasizing writing: it will yield us a better model not just for reading but for learning itself. The dominance of reading at all levels of education reinforces the problematic banking metaphor of learning: the assumption that students are vessels to be filled. But when we give equal emphasis to writing, we are more likely to assume the contrasting metaphor: learning is the making of meaning. This metaphor helps explain much that is otherwise paradoxical about the learning process:

- The more we write and talk, the more we have left to write and say. The greater the number of words that come out of us, the greater the number of words we find left inside.
- When students feel empty (“I have nothing to say, nothing on my mind”), the cause is not insufficient input but insufficient output. What gets more words in their heads is more talking and writing.
- Of course teachers and politicians love to talk: the more people talk, the more they want to talk.

When we see learning not as input but as the making of meaning and connections, these phenomena become natural, not paradoxical. Notice too that when we stop privileging reading over writing, we stop privileging passivity over activity. Yes, I grant the usefulness of the currently fashionable paradoxes: that the reading is really “writing” (actively creating meaning), and writing is really “reading” (passively finding what culture and history have inscribed in our heads). But in the end I would insist that writing simply does promote more activity and agency than reading:

- Reading tends to imply “Sit still and pay attention,” while writing tends to imply “Get in there and do something.”
- Reading asks, “What did they have to say?” while writing asks, “What do you have to say?” In normal speech listeners usually want to know what the speaker was actually intending to say, and this reinforces the impulse to “look for the right answer” in reading. Similarly, speakers usually have the impulse to say what’s on their mind, and this reinforces the impulse for writers to take authority over their own meaning.
- Reading tends to be a matter of the teacher and author choosing the words; writing tends to be a matter of the student choosing the words.
• Reading means consumption, writing means production. Part of the stale passivity of students comes from their being cast always in the role of consumer.

• I would point even to the purely physical dimension. Writing involves more physical movement than reading. Try this experiment: On an occasion when a discussion class goes listless or dead, have everyone stop talking and silently read a helpful piece of text; on another occasion have everyone stop and write something. You’ll find that students tend to be more awake and involved after they write—even displaying more tonus in their bodies—than after they read. (Notice also how the physical act of reading out loud—especially with any gesturing—helps the cognitive dimension of reading.)

In short, when we make writing as important as reading, we help students break out of their characteristically passive stance for school and learning. The primacy of reading in the reading/writing dichotomy is an act of locating authority away from the student and keeping it entirely in the teacher or institution or great figure. The privileging of reading over writing has locked schools into sending a pervasive, deep-level message: don’t speak until spoken to; don’t write your own ideas till you prove that you can reproduce correctly the ideas and information of others; writing means responding to authority outside the self; as a student you should be a consumer of knowledge, not a producer.

If we made writing as important as reading, we might begin to feel ourselves as writers too, not just readers. At present, when we take on the role of “academic,” we tend to take on the role of reader and critic—and not writer. To make this large change, we’d have to foster and nourish creative risk-taking in ourselves and in the profession. We celebrate the imagination in the authors we study; we would grow as a profession if we celebrated and cultivated it in ourselves too. Just as society or individual relationships lose vitality and intelligence if women or minority are suppressed, so English is losing vitality and intelligence because writing is suppressed.

Let me end this section by answering a possible objection: “We must keep writing in its secondary role—as the medium for responding to reading—or else we will invite romantic solipsism. If you invite students to write out of their own experience rather than in response to texts, you will increase the rampant individualism our culture suffers from—permitting students to disappear into cocoons of solipsistic isolation.” This fear rests on a misguided model of individual development—a kind of parody of Freud and Piaget that says children start out as egocentric monads dominated by selfish desires to stay separate and egocentric; and that they cannot become “decentered” or social without a terrible struggle. It’s as though we fear that our students are each in their own little bathroom and we must beat on the door and say, “What are you doing in there? Why have you been
in there so long with the door locked? Come on out and have some wholesome fun with us.”

But a very different course of development now seems more believable and generally accepted—a model that derives from thinkers like George Herbert Meade, Bakhtin, and Vygotsky: our children start out very social and intertwined. Their little selves are not hermetically sealed atoms but are rather deeply enmeshed or rooted in the important figures in their lives. We don’t have to struggle to make children want to connect with others—they are naturally already connected. We don’t have to bang on the bathroom door to make them listen, feel part of, and collaborate with the various people and cultural forces around them. They may not want to listen to us but that doesn’t make them private and solipsistic. (In fact it’s usually the private and solipsistic kids that listen best to us teachers.) What this picture of human development shows us is that separateness and autonomy are not qualities that children start out with but rather qualities they only gradually achieve—often with struggle and setbacks throughout adolescence and young adulthood. It can be a slow and difficult process for individuals to achieve a certain autonomous sense of self such that they can think and do things that are disapproved of by the community they feel part of. And it is writing, by the way, which is particularly powerful as a medium to help adolescents begin to learn to become a bit more reflective, be able to converse with themselves, not be so prey to cultural messages and peer standards and pressures.

I can give a concrete illustration of this psychological model: I find that when I work with adults, college students, and high school students, they are usually grateful when I show them various ways to use private writing—when I clear a lot of time and space and almost force them to do writing that they will not show to me or anyone else. If they are not already accustomed to using writing this way, they tend to experience it as a release or even as empowering. But when I work with first graders, they are uninterested and unimpressed. They tend to want to share everything they write. That is, as we get older, we tend to work at separating ourselves and sorting out what we choose as our own—and where we choose to fit in. It’s a life task. The point of my digression into developmental psychology, then, is this: if we move toward giving as much importance to writing as to reading—for example by sometimes inviting initiatory autonomous writing from the student’s own experience rather than always having writing respond to reading—we can nevertheless trust that students will come to us with a strong social connectedness that we couldn’t stamp out if we tried.

4. Ways to End the War and Create a More Productive Interaction between Reading and Writing

There are some specific practices that will help reading and writing reinforce each other better—in both curriculum and teaching.
In curriculum, the important steps are obvious and can be quickly described. First, we need more writing courses. When students are polled, they usually ask for more writing courses. Second, we need more of what are called “fifty-fifty courses”: half reading and half writing. Here are some good examples in the curriculum at the University of Vermont: “Writing Literary Criticism”; “Reading and Writing Nonfiction”; “Reading and Writing Autobiography”; “Personal Voice”; “Writing the New Yorker.” Some campuses have junior level courses in the disciplines (“Writing in Physics” or “Writing in Anthropology”) that are really fifty-fifty courses. Such courses are probably the most natural and fruitful place for reading and writing mutually to enhance each other: courses where we go back and forth constantly between reading and writing and neither activity is felt as simply a handmaiden to the other one.

In teaching, there are various ways that reading and writing can learn from each other. Let me look more concretely now at some teaching practices to see interesting ways in which we can give more emphasis to writing.

The obvious step is to assign more writing, but this leads to an obvious problem: it causes so much more work for us as teachers with all those papers to grade and respond to. But we can largely avoid this problem if we learn to use writing in the varied and flexible ways we use reading.

Notice, above all, that we don’t evaluate or grade all the reading we assign. It feels perfectly normal to assign lots of reading and test or evaluate or grade only some of it. For the rest, we assume that if students don’t do it, they’ll be less successful at the activities we do grade and evaluate. But somehow teachers tend to assume they have to evaluate comment on every piece of writing they assign.

For another example, in most courses we have both required reading and supplementary or suggested reading: texts we feel all students must read and texts we expect diligent or interested students to read. We don’t ask or expect them all to do it. Yet we seldom take this approach with writing.

In other words, whereas we usually have a spectrum of reading from high stakes to low stakes, most teachers fall unthinkingly into the habit of treating all writing as obligatory, high-stakes work. Writing is usually handled in such a way as to make it an unpleasant ordeal, even a punishment—for students and teacher. The flexible and varied uses of reading is a mark of the respect and sophistication with which we treat reading. We need to respect writing with similar flexibility—by also having low-stakes, supplementary, and experimental writing instead of being so rigid and one dimensional about it.

Many breakthroughs in our relation to writing occur when we learn to have a whole spectrum of writing—from high stakes to low stakes:

A few pieces (as now) that we evaluate and count as important.
Some more informal pieces that we collect but only grade with a check—or with "check plus" and "check minus." Some of these might function as drafts for evaluated pieces. Some pieces that we collect but just read or even just glance over—and that's all.

Some pieces that are purely private to help students think to themselves about the reading or discussion or lectures. Sometimes we devote some class time to this writing; sometimes we make it a journal assignment to be done as homework, and just check periodically to make sure students are keeping them up.

Some nonrequired pieces that are "supplementary" or "suggested": we read and give a brief comment to those pieces that are done. Even if relatively few students do these pieces, there are striking benefits not only to those students but in fact to the quality of the class as a whole. There is a richer mix of voices in the conversation—some of them much more invested and authoritative.

More and more teachers are helping students learn more by getting them to share their writing with each other, for example in pairs or small groups. It takes very little time for just sharing—and a great deal is learned. (It takes more time if we want students to give each other feedback, but that is not crucial. The greatest learning comes from the sharing itself.) In addition, many teachers get students to contribute (say) weekly to a computer conversation about the course material—if only in a low-tech way where students simply go to the computer lab once a week and add a few screens full to a class-conversation disk.

Similarly, teachers are learning flexible ways to publish student writing. We can use a lab fee to pay for class publications; can ask students to bring in twenty or so copies of something they have written. If I ask for two pages, single-spaced, back-to-back on a single sheet, this is very easy to manage, and therefore I can do it a number of times in a semester. Even in a class of one hundred students, we can ask them to bring in just twenty copies of their piece in order to make publications of a more manageable size.

Publication of student writing flushes out some interesting assumptions about reading and writing: we take it for granted that students should shell out money for reading, but some teachers are startled at the thought of asking them to do the same for writing. But such money is well spent, and students usually appreciate the result. And when we realize that students will have to pay for the publication of their writing, we tend to adjust our assignments in a helpful way: "Let's see. How can I frame an assignment that will lead to pieces of writing that other students would actually want to read and benefit from?" This is a question that cuts right to the
heart of good pedagogy: how to connect our material to their lives. The publication of student writing helps us here because when students write for publication, they find connections we’d never dream of.

If we brought to the evaluation of student writing the critical sophistication we take for granted in literary work, we wouldn’t do so much rigid and thoughtless ranking or grading. That is, in literary study we realize that there is no single correct interpretation of a text, that even the best critics cannot agree, and that it would be laughable to assign a quantitative grades to a text (and certainly not one based on one quick reading late at night). Thus literary consciousness would help us get away from assuming that we can immediately grade student writing with quantitative scores of A, B, C, and so forth. Grades of “strong,” “medium,” and “weak” would suffice. And by the end of the semester, these crude grades, along with a portfolio, would “add up” or at least point clearly to a final grade.

Writing as springboard. The conventional practice is almost always to start with reading and then write in response—making the writing serve the reading. But we can turn that around and write first and make reading serve writing. Certain teachers at all levels are slowly learning this approach. For example, teachers get students to write about an intense mental experience and what it feels like inside their heads. They use this as a springboard for reading some poems by Emily Dickinson. The goal is not just to read and appreciate Dickinson better—though of course that happens too—but to take student writing more seriously. Students come at Dickinson more as peers, saying things like, “She used a metaphor in this way, but I decided to do it that way.” When I had trouble getting students to connect with Shakespeare—putting him “under glass” as it were—for example in reading The Tempest where Prospero seems both hallowed yet unattractive—I started off by asking my students to write informally about their most longstanding unresolved grudge (fun in itself). When we turned to Shakespeare, students were more invested and skilled in dealing with this difficult Prospero and his grudge and the play. One of the main emphases in the powerful “Writing-across-the-Curriculum” movement is on helping students use writing not just for demonstrating what they have learned but also for the process of learning itself. Indeed many people call this the “Writing-to-Learn” movement.

Reading as springboard. But writing doesn’t have to come first to be important. We can have reading come first—and still serve writing. That is, we can use the reading as something to reply to, bounce off of, or borrow from. In this practice we are not trying to make the writing “do justice” to the reading or “get it right.” We are inviting students to use the reading as a springboard to their own writing: to use the theme or structure or spirit or energy of the text to spur their own writing. This, after all, is standard practice by writers (as Harold Bloom and others show): to misread or misuse or distort the works of others as a way to enable your own writing.
This approach is particularly important in getting students to try out imaginative pieces like those they are reading. Students are often nervous about writing poems, stories, or dramatic scenes/dialogues. We can help them by borrowing themes or structures from the reading. For example, a few key words or phrases from a poem can serve as a helpful springboard or scaffold that will help students find a way to write a poem or story of their own. Of course students need to be invited to treat imaginative writing as an experiment—not necessarily to finish or revise. I don’t feel I can grade these pieces, but I can require they be done.

Making writing more central in what was formerly just a “reading” or literature course causes a major change in the way students come at the reading. They are braver, more lively, and more thoughtful. We read differently when we read like a writer. (See Charles Moran’s classic article about this: “Reading Like a Writer.”) Students come at purely analytic discussions of texts in a much more shrewd and energetic way when they have had a chance to try out some of the same kinds of writing in an experimental, playful, nongraded way.

Rough drafts of reading. Students and colleagues would benefit enormously from the kind of workshop activity I described earlier: where students and teacher work together on texts that neither has seen before—periodically pausing during the process of reading to write out how they are perceiving and reacting to the text. This process helps everyone can see vividly how reading creates meaning by a process of gradual and often collaborative and transformative negotiation.

None of these teaching practices can be called wild or visionary any more. All are being used by teachers at all levels with all kinds of students. And if we use them more, we will think of more ways to bring reading and writing into a relationship of mutual support.

To close, I’ll evoke an image—a corrective paradigm for the relations between reading and writing. Teachers of kindergarten and first grade all around the country are demonstrating that writing is easier and more natural than reading, and that writing is more useful than reading for entrance into literacy. Their practice is based on a fact that is startling but obvious once demonstrated. Tiny children can write before they can read, can write more than they can read, and can write more easily than they can read. For small children can write anything they can say—once they know the alphabet and are shown the rudimentary trick of using invented spelling. Even they can “write” anything by just making scribbles. Often they don’t need to be taught; just ask them what writing is and they’ll do purposeful and meaningful scribbling. They’ll call it writing and they’ll be able to read back to you what they “wrote” (Harste, Woodward, and Burke).

In many classrooms around the country, kindergarteners and first graders are not just writing stories but “publishing” their own books. Teachers and helpers type up their writing in conventional spelling to go with the pictures that the children
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drew with their writing, and then these books are bound with cloth covers and become texts for reading. We tend to have been brainwashed into thinking that reading comes first and that reading is easier than writing, but the reverse is true. It has been demonstrated over and over that children get quicker understanding and control of literacy—language and texts—through writing than through reading. Thus output precedes input—and prepares the way for input. (People have done research comparing the stories that children in these classrooms write and read. The stories they write are at a higher level of development and sophistication than the stories they read.)

Of course the effects of this approach were obvious once people like Don Graves had the sense to figure it out: it vastly improves students skill and involvement in reading. Students are much more excited and competent when they read what they and their classmates have written than when they read published books from the outside (especially basal readers). They learn reading faster; they have a healthier stance toward reading—a stance that recognizes, “Hey, these things called books are what we write. Let’s read books to see what other people like us have written.” No longer do children think of books as something written by a corporate, faceless “they”—like arithmetic workbooks.

There is a much-told story of a reporter visiting one of these classrooms where the first graders eagerly offer to show him some of their books. “Have you really written a book?” the reporter asks one child with a tone of condescending surprise. “Haven’t you?” replies the child.

Just think how it would be if we and our students were more like these first graders. They are so eager to read and to write; they are the happiest and most invested in their literacy of any students in the whole educational world. We can move decisively in that direction by ending the priority of reading and giving more serious and playful priority to writing—though bringing to writing some of the flexible sophistication we use in reading—so that both processes reinforce each other as equals.

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