

Buckets and Fires: A Contrarian View of Long-Form Writing Pedagogy

David Abrahamson, Northwestern University

d-abrahamson@northwestern.edu

So much has changed since the turn of the century in the world of journalism. Given the ongoing existential crisis, when I think about my approach to our long-form writing classes, I have to confess that I don't know whether I'm locked in the past or lost in some future alternate, even indeterminate other universe. Nevertheless, there is one fundamental tenet that I cling to: I believe high expectations in the classroom are everything.

I am convinced that students respond to our body language, through our choice of words, through how we interact with them at all sorts of nonverbal levels. They take that message, and they internalize it in ways we can never imagine. So it seems useful to me that one might approach this whole question of long-form pedagogy in the following way.

The essential question is "Where is the bar?" It's a question I ask myself all the time. I suppose there are three answers, all of which are obvious.

One is to pitch your class at the level of the slower members, so you can make sure you don't leave anybody behind, which is good. But you could bore your brighter students very quickly.

Or you could pitch your instruction at the mean—or median. There's a certain sense of security there, but then I have found that you're losing the slowest and boring the fastest, so it's the worst of both worlds.

Or you can pitch it at the top, encouraging everyone to scramble. You say: "This is the standard. It may put you at an uncomfortable place right now, but the goal is improvement, and if you improve you will feel really good about yourself."

Perhaps I'm flattering myself at this moment to ask, "Guess which one I use?" Yes, I use the last. Because I am a believer in that lovely saying by Irish poet William Butler Yeats we all know well: "Education isn't filling a bucket, it's lighting a fire." I sort of live by that.

With Yeats in mind, here are two things I do which I've found useful. In the first class of the term I offer the students two chestnuts. One is I tell the students that they are going to write the best piece they have ever written in my class. And I add: "You're going to be responsible for doing this. It will all come from within you. There's nothing in my head I'm trying to put in your head; I'm trying to help you find something that's inside yourself."

The aphorism is: "I want you to find the region of your heart where the animal roams free."

The region of your heart where the animal roams free— and then I look at one of the students and I say, "Do you even know you have an animal in your heart?" And they're all kind of "Oh God, he's crazy" now.

And I say "Well, you do. And you have to find it. Most likely most of you don't know what the region is, or where it is, or what the animal is. But writing is a lovely way to determine that. And that is going to be our mission."

The second thing I say over and over again is: "You cannot fail. I will not allow you to fail. Failure is not an option. I hate sports metaphors, but I would rather you swing as hard as you can and miss completely than not swing at all. There are no bunts in this class."

First of all, quite reasonably, they're terrified. There is no formula, no easy way. The responsibility is all on them. But with a little bit of care and kindness, they realize they're being given an opportunity. And almost all of them really rise to the occasion.

There are, of course, some corollary implications to approaching the writing class this way:

Even though some students have introductory journalism skills courses, I am very comfortably dismissing short-form journalism altogether. I say we are not going to talk about little 200-word things. I am certain you all know how to do listicles. You're completely confident in your tweeting, and all of that. You probably taught yourself that when you were 11 years old.

We're going to talk about something much bigger, something much more substantial and aspirational. My job is to encourage you, to tell you: "Don't worry. I won't let you drown. Come down to the deep end of the pool."

The first piece is going to be 1500-2000 words, which is a little scary. And you can imagine the student being the first in their family to go to college, and they're not terribly confident in their verbal skills. But it's amazing how they rise to the occasion when given the opportunity to rise to the occasion.

I am a firm believer in the students teaching themselves. Everything we do in the class is shared with everyone using a listserv. My rationale is that I tell them that almost all the things I still remember from my own formal education, I learned from other students and their work, rather than from the person at the front of the class.

As a result, you're going to see copies of everything else everyone does. I don't expect you to read every word, but I do expect you to scan it. And you should be able to talk about it, so when I call on you, you should have something to say. Perhaps it is self-deception to think most of them do it most of the time, but I have to confess that I don't really know.

Moreover, this context of interactivity does facilitate learning. For example, I believe in teaching writing starting out with the proposal or query model. In long-form, you have to be able to tell someone what it is you're going to write before you write it. There are, of course, many other ways to write: stream of consciousness, the interior monologue, etc. But you have to be able to tell me what the piece is going to be before you do it. When you go out and do the reporting, it might change. But the difference between long-form journalism—more advanced journalism—and conventional journalism is quite stark.

In the latter we claim to have no preconceived notions. I'm going to do all the reporting, and my conclusion will only arise from the reporting—this despite the fact that we know that we cannot help but approach any subject with a set of preconceptions.

In long-form, however, I am your teacher/editor, and you are going to have to tell me, in advance, the theme of your piece. In the proposal I insist that students answer, albeit implicitly, the following statement: "In this piece I will assert that <fill in the blank>." That's the thematic statement, the central argument, the premise or the piece. It's somewhat difficult for students to do at first, because they've been taught the conventional journalistic method. So they struggle a bit with that.

Our proposals are shared with everyone in the class, and a fellow student has to write a critique of it. It is written as if it's a beloved editor dealing with their beloved contributor, saying this how the story idea can be improved. My assumption here is that students can be more insightfully critical of other work rather than of their own.

Once the piece is written, again, everyone gets a copy, and another (different) student is given the manuscript to edit. The essential question: How can it be improved? Some do a wonderful job; for some it's their first real experience in line editing. But, again, they see their fellow students' efforts, which serve as examples of how it might be done.

Then they write an editing memo, as if they're writing not to the writer but to their boss. Saying "This is what I think can be done to improve the piece." Once again it is critical skills applied to work other than their own.

A point about the emotional context of the class: When that fellow student is involved in the editing process, I think it provides a bit of emotional distance. It sort of lowers the temperature of the classroom. The students get to know each other. They kind of get used to each other. They sort of trust each other. We're all in this together; no one's being made to look bad. And the trust tends to make the whole system work—which, I have to admit, is something of a mystery to me.

And a point about grading: when they turn in the manuscript the first time, I do not grade it. I annotate it and turn it in back to them. Then they do the first rewrite, I annotate it a second time, I give it to them for the second rewrite. Then it's turned in and graded.

And lastly, a brief word about the changes we face, specifically the nature of our students. Yes, they have changed, and will continue to change—to my eye, especially in the last 15 years or so. Does that comport with your experience as teachers? Do you think students are changing? A few nods.

The clay we are given is indeed different, perhaps even in a constant state of flux. That is to say, my own educational experiences as a student have very little utility to me as a teacher in a classroom today. I am certain that the way I was taught is not the way that I can teach anymore. It wouldn't work at all.

A very important point to be kept in mind is that the students today are as confused as all the changes facing journalism as we are. Perhaps that contributes to making them even more challenging to teach, more concerned about the future and less deferential. This last aspect, deference, I admit it can be a little troubling, even problematical at times.

But then I remind myself that I am charged with educating journalists, and in their future working lives, they will have to face self-serving sources, petulant officialdom and all the many challenges and uncertainties that will certainly characterize their professional lives in the years to come.

And so I suspect that it will be perseverance and fortitude, not deference, that will serve them, and our profession, exceedingly well.