A Cure for Writer's Block:

Writing for Real Audiences

BY ANNE RODIER

We've worked hard to raise our inner-city school's writing scores. Our crumbling walls are set amidst the projects, a place where one wouldn't expect to find young people doing much writing other than graffiti or love letters. It took us years of goofs to figure out how to encourage our students to become successful writers, but today our school's writing scores are third highest of twenty-five schools in the district.

Over time we have discovered that our students are just like us: They have to grow into being writers. They have to believe that what they have to say is important enough to bother writing. They have to experience writing for real audiences before they will know that writing can bring them power.

This year, I've been watching the way one of my seniors, Rudy, approaches writing. I find it amusing that he's a lot like me. He can't settle down to his work. Any distraction interrupts him. He can't use a pencil, needs music, a better chair, a different atmosphere. According to him in his letter to the reviewer of his portfolio, "You can't make romantic love at a head banger's ball or tap dance at a Hip-Hop party. I wish I could scribble off hundreds of pages, but if my surroundings aren't right, then I can't work....I'm an artist. I'm committed to the art form. We've been dating, engaged, and married until talent do us part. I love what I do."

I've been working on "Emily," my great American novel-in-progress, for years, and I think I'm also at the wrong party. I've probably bought about fifty new pens to try for inspiration, experimented with blue, pink, and yellow legal paper, tried wide ruled and college. I've moved my writing desk to every room in my house, and discovered thirty different favorite composers who most inspire my writing. I never write in my loft. My exercise bike is there and it makes me feel guilty because I'm not using it. I go to my favorite restaurant, the Come Back Inn, try a glass of wine, wear a special shirt, put my hair up, take it down, hold a crystal, put pictures of my last trip around me.

Playing Writer

Like Rudy, I'm in love with being a writer. It doesn't matter that I talk about writing my novel more than I actually write it. Even my daughter caught me at playing writer. We were shopping for lamps. She wanted cheap and functional. She found hers quickly. I turned on each one, traded lamp shades and tried to sense the mood each might create for my writing. After forty minutes, her patience gave out.

"I know you need the perfect lamp to create your romantic notion of being a writer in your loft. Here, pick the Victorian one." I did.

Why do Rudy and I fidget rather than write? Rudy calls it "writer's block." I think it's something else. We both have a hard time finding exactly why we are writing and to whom.

Rudy and I both write very personal, autobiographical stuff. We both read works by others who do the same. We still get nowhere. Rudy has a deadline — portfolios are due in April. "Emily" has no deadline. Her purpose is to help me keep my romantic image of being a writer. The audience for my novel is nebulous. I can't seem to pin it down. I don't know how to help Rudy.

"What are you trying to say here, Rudy?"

"I don't know. It's a feeling I want to give the reader."

For him, it's always love. For me, it's the wonder of revelation about life.

A few years ago, I published a book. My publisher made me meet deadlines. I procrastinated, but I had a story I wanted to tell and an audience who needed to hear it. A very good friend had just died of AIDS, and I had to navigate my way through the medical and legal issues attached to his long and depressing illness amidst an array of attitudes expressed by the people surrounding us. His parents abandoned him completely, while some very welcome and sometimes unexpected support came from friends and AIDS organizations. It was important to me that I let others who were dealing with similar issues know that they weren't alone, that there are many who are caring supporters when family fails to be so. With AIDS at an epidemic level, the need for immediacy hung heavy on my pen and I pushed myself to get my story into my readers' hands.

Having a Story to Tell

When our department became embroiled in censorship, my students learned firsthand the power of having a story to tell. One of our teachers was offering an optional novel that dealt with issues of race, religion, and homosexuality. When some members of the community got wind of this book's contents, they objected, and our students' reallife lessons in writing began. Parents wanted the book banned and the teacher fired. Our students felt otherwise. They spoke at hearings, wrote the press, spoke to reporters. We told them to shape all their thoughts in writing first so that they would

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be better prepared, more organized. After months of turmoil, their efforts were rewarded and the book remained as an optional reading choice with parental permission. The author sent us flowers and we all felt powerful. The English department finally learned the meaning of real-life writing: It allows one to shape one's life and change one's world.

Louise Rosenblatt talks about the "poem," or the meaning, being the coming together of the writer, text, and reader (1994, p.12). What we discovered through our censorship experience is that the "poem" is the coming together of any writer, text, and reader for real purposes, not the student writing for the teacher for a grade.

Motivating Students

What if part of every student's curricular year included real-life, change-your-world writing? What if every teacher guided students to find the right focus for the right audience? What if they actually expected responses as a result of their writing? The possibilities are endless. Papers in science journals, poetry in *Redbook*, changes in local government, financial support for school and personal projects, TV scripts, children's books, grants to fund science projects, fights against censorship.

Students writing for real audiences are motivated in a way that students churning out papers for grades are not. As for Rudy, I knew he did not care much about grades. I approached him after his two-week winter vacation at his family's home in New York.

"How'd your writing go over the break?"
Rudy was sprawled in my chair, a bit on
guard, wondering about my motives. I am
his teacher, after all, and he missed a big
deadline. Several totally revised, ready-to-

publish pieces were due before the break. He'd left town planning to work on a delightful, unfinished piece chronicling his love for beautiful women, specifically one who had been unfaithful, causing him to end their relationship. I had hopes that he'd found his muse in the Big Apple.

"Well," he shifted and put on his best student-working-the-teacher attitude. "I went home and I saw three shows!"

This ruse worked for a minute because he knew how much I envied his time at these Broadway shows. I really wanted to hear his story.

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"Of course, we did New Year's on Times Square. It was packed, you couldn't move, and someone started shooting right after the ball dropped."

How could I not respond to that? I'd clung to the television coverage of Times Square while he was actually there.

Rudy squirmed again, then confessed. "I didn't really write. I just hung out. I was home, in the old neighborhood." He paused. Fidgeted. "I still can't figure out what to write."

Naming Your Audience

That's when I pounced. "Rudy, I know what your problem is. Who are you telling this story to? Who would you really talk to about your feelings about this girl?"

At first, he just looked at me like I was nuts, but I could see his brain working. He smiled, "Yeah. That's exactly the problem."

"Who's your audience, Rudy?"

"I guess anyone."

"No. You need to find a real audience."

"But who would want to read this?"

"My point exactly! Let's try out some ideas. How about a feature article for the school newspaper offering advice to students about relationships?"

No response.

"Maybe a letter to her telling her what you think about what she did to you?" He shook his head.

"A short story creating the anguish and pain you felt, aimed at teenage readers so they know they aren't alone in their misery?"

He gave me a "duh" kind of look as if to ask why he would care about other teens' problems.

"Come on, help me here. You obviously want to tell this story. Who cares about it?"

Rudy finally lifted his eyebrows. I knew he had an idea. "I have a cousin in Brooklyn. I talk to him a lot. He could be my audience." Pause. Brain action. "But then should I write it like I'd really write to him? I mean, we'd say she had a fat ass, but that doesn't seem right for what I'm writing."

"Hmm." I paused. Brain action. "Sometimes when I write home, I actually employ my craft. My family knows I'm an English teacher and a writer. But every now and then, I write a letter that makes them say, 'I can see why Anne's an English teacher and a writer."

A grin. "Yeah, kind of like performing, acting through writing, like having a—"

"Persona, a voice, telling the right story to the right person in the right way."

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"That's what I'll do then. Yeah! I'll write to my cousin, he'll be my audience. But—"

"What?"

"Well, the girl has tried to get tight with me again. I don't like her anymore. I don't want to see her. Do I add that or what?"

"I don't know. I guess you're going to have to make that choice as a writer."

"Okay, yeah, I think that's what I'll do."

"And Rudy, about your deadline."

"I know, it's due in March."

"No, it's due next week. A full draft."

I escorted him, late, to class amidst protests

that he wanted to stay and write. Maybe he'd go home and finish it if I let the tension build.

We really do fail our students when we don't help them find a way to write real stuff, and if I hadn't struggled as a writer as Rudy has struggled, I wouldn't have been able to help him find his audience. What it all comes to is that if what you are writing has no possibility of making a difference, of reaching a real audience for real purposes, then there will be no investment in the work. When our inner-city students score higher in writing than the East End privileged kids, we know it's because we don't have them write just for a grade. We have them write for real.

That year, Rudy became a professional writer. He learned to identify an audience for the story that he was aching to tell. Now he's in New York with a recording contract, writing song lyrics for — it goes without saying — real audiences.

Reference

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