

Writing Communities: Assessing Effective Written Communication

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Lesson: Writing Communities: Assessing Effective Written Communication

Timeframe: approximately 70-75 minutes (taught in a 75-minute class period)

Target Audience: The target audience for this lesson is upper-division college and/or university students. The lesson plan was developed for Creative Arts 172 (CA172), The Arts in US Society, (an upper-division general education “Area S” course and a required course for majors in the Creative Arts Program in the Department of Humanities).¹ The course has a 3000-word writing requirement, but because it is primarily content-based, we spend little time on writing itself.

Materials needed (including preparation):

- The week prior to this lesson, students have submitted the first draft of a short paper (1000-1250 words) on any topic. (In CA172 they analyze a work of contemporary art/popular culture.)
- The week prior to this lesson, students were assigned to small “writing communities” (groups of 3-4 students) and were asked to read all papers from their group (posted electronically or exchanged via email) to prepare for this lesson.
- Students should bring hard copies of their papers to class as well as pens and paper.
- The instructor should bring for every student:
 - a paper copy of the CBEST rubric (pp. 1-2 of *CBEST Practice Test: Writing*, 2005).
 - a packet of sample paragraphs of former student work.

Objectives:

- Students will be able to use the California Basic Educational Skills Test (CBEST) Practice Test rubric to assess and rank their own written work (as well as that of their writing community peers) and explain the rankings they assign.²
- Students will be able to identify editing strategies for revising/improving their own written work that responds to an assignment prompt in which they have been asked to analyze a work of contemporary art based only on observation and the information provided by the exhibiting museum.
- Students will be able to collaborate effectively and will develop an understanding of writing as a community process aimed at communicating an effective and clear message

¹ Area “S” is the designation used at SJSU for one of the required upper division general education course areas. In an Area S course, students explore the interrelationships of individuals, racial groups, and cultural groups to understand and appreciate issues of diversity, equality, and structured inequality in the U.S., its institutions, and its cultures. Courses are offered in programs and departments as diverse as anthropology, creative arts, religious studies, Mexican-American studies, childhood development, and so on. See <http://info.sjsu.edu/web-dbgen/narr/catalog/rec-1431.html>.

² National Evaluative Systems, Inc., *CBEST Practice Test: Writing*, 2005, 1-2. Available at www.cbest.nesinc.com/PDFs/CA_OPT_Writing.pdf.

in which they analyze the work of art. (*Note: The content of the writing assignment can be modified in order to be useful in other class contexts.*)

Background: Students rarely are able to articulate what constitutes effective written communication and conceive of writing as a private affair between themselves and their professor; one recent scholar went as far as to say that the very form of academic writing may help produce bad work.³ The goal of this lesson is to make the required writing assignment more collaborative and to empower students to become more confident in their own ability to recognize and produce effective written communication.

Introduction to Lesson [1-2 minutes]:

1. Write agenda on the board:
 - Introduction: Communities and Communication [1-2 min]
 - Scope of Activity [1-2 min]
 - Discuss, Model, and Norm the Rubric [25 min]
 - Writing Communities Hands-on Activity [25-30 min]
 - Large Group Discussion [2-3 min]
 - Individual Hands-on Activity [3-4 min]
 - Closure/Evaluation [2-3 min]
2. Review the purpose of the paper you have assigned and confirm that all students have prepared for the lesson (namely that they have read all papers in their small writing community).
3. Point to the common root of the words “communication” and “community” as you ask the students to sit in their previously formed writing communities and distribute paper copies of the CBEST rubric to everyone in the class. *Most students think of writing as a painful solo affair or a private secret. This lesson plan aims to show students the benefits of getting peer feedback in the writing process.*

Procedure [60-65 minutes]:

Step 1: Introduce the scope of activity [1-2 minutes]

- Discuss the purpose of this lesson and describe the scope of the class activity.
- Inform students that they will use this rubric to discuss and rank their own and one another’s work. *The purpose is to allow them to determine revision strategies and improve their writing before re-submitting the paper in two weeks and to empower them to identify effective written communication that meets the writing prompt criteria.*

Step 2: Discuss the rubric [5 minutes]

- Ask students to read the rubric quietly to themselves.
- Discuss each of the categories and possible rankings; highlight key terms (e.g., noting

³ Stanley Fish, *How to Write a Sentence: and How to Read One*, New York: Harper, 2012.

“well reasoned” versus “adequately reasoned”).

Step 3: Model the rubric [10 minutes]

- Point out that the rubric is the current standard in the California Writing Test for teachers. *Students are often future-directed, wanting practical advice and assessment from a “real-world” perspective, and this rubric is an example of professional measurements after the undergraduate level.*
- Initiate a short discussion about the possible differences between concepts such as “well” or “adequately” reasoned.
- Remind students to consider the target audience and the goal of their writing assignment as they rank the papers. *The measurement must be contextualized to have any value—that they must know the purpose of the writing to determine if it is “well” or “adequately” reasoned.*
- Distribute to each student a packet of sample paragraphs from students in a previous year or semester—include one paragraph from a well-reasoned student essay, an adequately reasoned essay, and so on.
- Select one of the sample paragraphs and read it aloud to the class.
- Have the groups discuss the paragraph (referring to their own copies) for 2-3 minutes.

Step 4: Norm the rubric [10 minutes]

- Share the ranking for the sample paragraph and ask students to highlight the components that might account for that ranking.
- Have the students continue to examine the other sample paragraphs in the same way for the remaining time so that they become familiar with using the rubric. Allow some time for questions about applying the rubric.

Step 5: Writing communities hands-on activity [25-30 minutes]

- Each small writing community performs a final review of the rubric. (1-2 minutes)
- Each community discusses its papers, one at a time, while applying the rubric. (3-4 minutes per paper depending on the number of students in the group) *Instructor: Frequently inform the groups about how much time remains in the segment so that they stay on schedule.* (15-17 minutes)
- Each community drafts 2-3 sentences as a group that explains the ranking given to each paper. This should be written directly on the hard copy that each author brings to class. (6-8 minutes)
- Each community discusses the benefits of reading, sharing, and discussing written work in a group and prepares one very brief “tweet-sized” outcome to share with the entire class (e.g. “it’s all in the thesis statement #thesis matters” or “re-read and re-vise to be wise #kickmypapersass”). (2-3 minutes)

Step 6: Large group discussion [2-3 minutes]

- Each writing community shares its “tweet” with the larger group.
- In a large group, reflect on benefits of sharing and discussing during the writing process.

Step 7: Individual hands-on activity: reflection and identification of areas for improvement [3-4 minutes]

- Ask students to write down (1) one thing they learned about identifying effective writing, (2) one strong point in their written communication, and (3) at least two things they need to revise or develop in order to improve their paper. *Students will keep these notes, along with the hard copy of their paper with the group comments, to revise their paper at home.*

Closure/Evaluation [2-3 minutes]:

- Announce that the revised paper is due in two weeks.
- Ask students to write on notecards one thing they did not understand or one question that will further understanding.
- Collect the notecards. *Begin the next class session with a discussion of these questions/comments.*

Lesson Analysis:

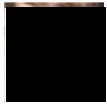
This is an original lesson plan that I first taught in fall 2012. It had very good results and positive feedback from initially skeptical students (who were surprised to see they were required to read one another's written work and even more surprised to know they would be discussing and ranking the work in small groups). At the end of the lesson, they claimed to feel more empowered to discuss their own writing and to explain the workings of effective written communication. Students did need to be assured that they were not "grading" one another's work. Within a week, the faculty member must also follow up with written comments that identify one or two strengths as well as the main areas that require improvement so that these comments can be integrated into the revision process. This lesson is not meant to be a substitute for faculty comments but to come before faculty comments and to bring writing out of the closet, so to speak.

This lesson is easily adapted to any course using short writing assignments (so that students can be asked to read five to six papers before the class). The main requirement is to assign a short paper on a single, shared topic and then require that students read all papers in their small writing communities prior to this lesson.

CBEST WRITING SCORE SCALE

Score	CBEST Score Point Descriptions
4	<p>A "4" is a well-formed writing sample that effectively communicates a whole message to the specified audience.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The writer clearly presents a central idea and/or point of view and maintains focus on that topic; the response is well reasoned. • Ideas or points of discussion are logically arranged, and their meaning is clearly communicated. • Generalizations and assertions are well supported with relevant, specific, and detailed development. • Choice of words is precise; usage is careful and accurate. • The writer composes sentences of syntactic complexity and variety and constructs coherent paragraphs, although the response may contain minor flaws in mechanical conventions. • The response completely addresses the topic and uses language and style appropriate for the given audience and purpose.
3	<p>A "3" is an adequately formed writing sample that communicates a message to the specified audience.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The writer presents a central idea and/or point of view, and the focus is generally maintained; the response is adequately reasoned. • Organization of ideas is generally clear and effective, and the meaning is generally clear. • Generalizations and assertions are adequately supported, although perhaps unevenly. • Word choice and usage are adequate; some errors exist but do not impede meaning. • The writer's response may have errors in paragraphing, sentence structure, and/or mechanical conventions, but they are neither serious nor frequent enough to distract or confuse the reader. • The response may not fully address the topic (i.e., one of the tasks in the assignment may be neglected or may be vaguely or incompletely addressed), but language and style are appropriate for the given audience and purpose.
2	<p>A "2" is a partially formed writing sample that attempts to communicate a message to the specified audience.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The writer may state a central idea and/or point of view but loses focus on that idea; the response is simplistically reasoned. • Organization of ideas may be evident, but is largely ineffective, and the response is generally unclear. • Generalizations and assertions are only partially supported; the response may contain irrelevant, insufficient, or imprecise details. • Word choice and usage are generally imprecise and distracting. • The writer's response may have distracting errors in paragraphing, sentence structure, mechanical conventions, and/or dependence upon short, choppy sentences with minimal modification. • The response incompletely addresses most tasks of the assignment and/or inadequately uses language and/or style appropriate for the given audience and purpose.
1	<p>A "1" is an inadequately formed writing sample that fails to communicate a message to the specified audience.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The writer fails to state and/or to remain focused on a central idea and/or point of view; the response lacks coherence and reason. • Organization of ideas is ineffective and seriously flawed; meaning is unclear throughout. • Generalizations and assertions are not supported or are severely underdeveloped; the presentation of details is confused. • Word choice and usage are largely imprecise, and there are severe distracting errors. • The writer commits serious and numerous errors in paragraphing, sentence structure, and/or mechanical conventions. • The response demonstrates little or no understanding of any of the assignment's tasks; language and style may be inappropriate for audience and purpose.
U	<p>The response is unscorable because it is off topic, illegible, primarily in a language other than English, or of insufficient length to score.</p>
B	<p>The essay response sheet is blank.</p>

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Blog #1 : Beta Space: Ranu Mukherjee: Telling Fortunes

Sep 28, 2012 5:56 PM

The San Jose Museum of Art is currently housing the nomad-inspired works of Ranu Mukherjee in the latest installment of the Silicon Valley centered exhibition series Beta Space. This exhibition, with the full title Beta Space: Ranu Mukherjee: Telling Fortunes, looks to the idea of the contemporary nomad and how migratory groups have and are currently impacting the Silicon Valley. Gathering her inspiration from other individual's immigration stories, Mukherjee creates multimedia works that raise questions about how travel has shaped our local and national cultural identities.

Mukherjee's work in Telling Fortunes is concerned with how the nomadic exists in the 21st century. She is interested in immigration and artifacts associated with the individual's movement across national and physical borders, and incorporated these motifs into the works of this exhibition. We see this offered in many ways, from the literal image of children sitting on luggage awaiting their move in Chicago to Hyderabad 1972, Saera R Khan, to a grouping of four images submitted by immigrants of important items that symbolize their nomadism. Mukherjee focuses her works on South Asian, Chinese, and Latino groups, who are all making major contributions to the culture of the Silicon Valley.

Several framing devices tell us how to read the pieces of Telling Fortunes. Foremost is the title, which brings up images of cultures that traditionally use fortune telling. It also can be interpreted as someone's fortune being 'telling' of their success, a common thread in the American dream being that if you work hard you can make it big in the US. This American dream has drawn countless people from all over the world to our shores, and the idea of the nomad in America can find its origins here. Another framing device is the medium used for the assorted works. Some pieces are printed on traditional silk used for sari's, while two of the works are animated movies projected onto the wall. This mix of traditional and new-wave media resembles the change of pace associated with the nomad experience, from the culturally familiar to the fast-changing technological scene. This juxtaposition helps the audience understand that this exhibit intends on mixing these aspects, while the inclusion of the newer media lets them know that

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Blog #1

28 september 2012

In A Beta Space, We May Tell Fortunes

In an effort to bring together the masses of San Jose and showcase different aspects of the area, The San Jose Museum of Modern Art has put together an exhibition series entitled *BETA Space*. The museum put together this series by commissioning new artwork by contemporary artists. Currently the museum is commissioning artist Ranu Mukherjee to create pieces that, for her, feel as though they embody this great area. As a group, our class took a trip to see this exhibition series, entitled *BETA Space: Ranu Mukherjee: Telling Fortunes*, in order to formulate our own thoughts and ideas on the nomad.

What greatly influenced our perception of the exhibition were the various frames through which we were filtering the works. For example, the museum acted as a frame, informing us that what we were about to see was deemed “worthy” of being considered art. Had this exhibition been in, say, a pop up tent on the side of the road, our perception of it would change because our frame had changed. In that case, the exhibition may have seemed juvenile or lacking merit. The title of the exhibition series itself, as well as Mukherjee's subtitle, also acted as frames through which we read the works. The exhibition series name *BETA Space*, informed us that the exhibition would pertain to Silicon Valley “identity” and

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Space

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CA 172- Arts in US Society

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Beta Space: Ranu Mukherjee: Telling Fortunes

The San Jose Museum of Art has an ongoing exhibition series called *Beta Space*, which focuses on different aspects of the local Silicon Valley condition with each new artist that is invited to participate. Currently, Boston native Ranu Mukherjee is showing her *Telling Fortunes* collection inside of the *Beta Space*. Mukherjee has decided to focus on the identity of the modern day nomad, and its connection to the inhabitants of Silicon Valley. Every since our humble beginnings as an agricultural hub, all the way until our current condition as one of the leading technology and innovation centers of the world; the concept of the "nomad" has consistently been apparent. The modern day nomad can be defined in many ways, including people who commute to work or school, immigrant laborers, international or exchange students, or anyone who travels as a way of life. The Silicon Valley is the perfect subject for analyzing this condition because of the obvious connection our inhabitants have to the definition of the modern nomad. Mukherjee combines the message of the nomad with the transformation that the Silicon Valley has endured to show the intertwined connection they share.

Mukherjee has expressed a real interest in giving a voice and story to the nomads of Silicon Valley. Throughout her work in *Telling Fortunes*, Mukherjee reached out not only to human nomads of the area, but also plants, animals, and other aspects of natural life that fit into the nomadic identity. Through voluntary submissions, Mukherjee was able to collect images from outside people that represented their own nomadic identity for her to use in the collection. She also traveled to different areas of San Jose including Happy Hollow Zoo, the

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  **Blog #1: Beta Space**
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The San Jose Museum of Art presents the series *Beta Space: Ranu Mukherjee: Telling Fortunes*.

Nomads over time, here in San Jose, the Silicon Valley, and in other places, are what have made life today what it is. The San Jose Museum of Art has put together a beautiful and innovative exhibition series called *Beta Space*, which is now housing the artwork of Ranu Mukherjee. This exhibition comments on US society and contemporary nomads. It shows some of the aspects of the "identity" of San Jose and the Silicon Valley. Ranu Mukherjee is a contemporary artist whose work focuses on the nomad, and people's personal experiences of travel through world. The exhibition series commissions work that represents the local society of San Jose and the Silicon Valley, and Mukherjee's representation is one worth seeing.

Beta Space: Ranu Mukherjee: Telling Fortunes is the exhibition series put on by the San Jose Museum of Art, and is currently hosting Ranu Mukherjee's *Telling Fortunes*. When looking deeper into the meaning behind the title, it must first be broken apart. The title *Beta Space* means a secondary or experimental space which is much like the Silicon Valley. The Silicon Valley is known for its advances in technology and ability to create the next new thing. Mukherjee's self created title, *Telling Fortunes*, has a deeper meaning as well, and is a double entendre. Her artwork is telling the fortunes of the local area, and the fortunes she is representing are telling. Mukherjee's work focuses on the nomad, and this exhibition series allows for the themes of the local identity and the nomad to be brought together. Through her nomadic theme, Mukherjee shows how the modern day nomad influences change and how over time, through the development of new and advanced technologies, life in an area changes and the old way of life gets left behind, only taking the important stuff with it, much like a nomad.

The nomads of today are people who have uprooted their lives, moving from one place to another, only taking with them the things that are most important. Some modern day nomads bring their ideals and beliefs into the new area where they live, exposing others

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Blog #1 Beta Space

Sep 28, 2012 12:31 PM

Beta Space: Ranu Mukherjee: Telling Fortunes

The San Jose Museum of Art is a contemporary and modern art museum in Silicon Valley. According to their vision stated on their website, the museum's aim is to show the cultural mix and innovation that is at the heart of the area. An interesting point given in an online article, on the Spartan Daily website is that Ranu Mukherjee, the artist of the current *Beta Space* exhibit, came across in her research, the parallel that both a museum and a zoo, one with artworks and the other with animals, circulate, protect, and educate.

The exhibition series is titled *Beta Space: Ranu Mukherjee: Telling Fortunes*. The exhibition is commissioned by the museum. This means that contemporary artist Ranu Mukherjee was invited to create works that are related to the cultural identity of San Jose. There is a double meaning within the subtitle, *Telling Fortunes*. One way of interpreting it is that predictions are being made. The other meaning of the title is that of fortunes revealing the past. Through the pieces she has created, she is trying to discover who the nomads are of Silicon Valley.

A nomad is someone who has no permanent dwelling travels from place to place to live. In order to survive they will go wherever is needed. In *Telling Fortunes*, nomads are represented through the migrant labor looking for work, students, and those involved with technology that are looking for work. Students, in particular, move here to make a step in improving their lives by furthering their education. Their time here is often temporary for they will probably move again after graduating. To Mukherjee, as mentioned on her website, the nomad is relatable to others because of the feeling of unpredictability that is common and even desired.

Beta Space printed on the window straight ahead is the first thing viewed upon entering the exhibit. Behind the window is an outdoor area that contains a piece of the collection. On the right hand wall, the next thing to come is four didactics in four different languages. They each give an explanation of the exhibit. Right next to the description of the exhibit is the first piece, *Ghost River 2*, a piece of ink on silk.

Moving further into the main space, there is another piece of ink on silk