

# Creative Composing: A Lesson Plan for Students, Teachers, and Teacher-Writers

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**Tags:** feminist pedagogy, creative writing, teaching, student writing, reflection, personal experience

## Introduction

This lesson plan focuses specifically on Wendy Bishop's chapter "When All Writing is-Creative and Student Writing is Literature," from *The Subject is Writing*, 2<sup>nd</sup> edition. Like so much of Bishop's work, her style and structure serve as direct evidence for her primary argument. She "creatively composes" this chapter, demonstrating the natural overlap between creative and academic pursuits and between student writing and the literature we teach. While Bishop's work predates the subject we now call rhetorical feminism, she offers a clear example of its key tenets—inclusivity, community, and equity. She privileges dialogue over monologue, inviting students to draw on their own experiences as they develop an empowered and growth-oriented writing practice.

It was long after my graduate training at Florida State that I found language for the re-orientation that Wendy instilled in me. In reading Carolyn Shrewsbury's "What is Feminist Pedagogy?" and later Cheryl Glenn's "Remapping Rhetorical Territory," I came to recognize that my teaching practice moved in these same directions and that I had been guided by Wendy to radically alter the power dynamics and the communication opportunities in my writing classroom. In Shrewsbury's words, I had created, somewhat unconsciously, a "liberatory environment," which she describes as:

A classroom characterized as persons connected in a net of relationships...in which we, teacher-student and student-teacher, act as subjects, not objects. Feminist pedagogy is engaged teaching/learning—engaged with self in continuing reflective process; engaged

actively with the material being studied; engaged with others in a struggle to get beyond destructive hatreds and to work together to enhance our knowledge; engaged with the community and with movements for social change (166).

Reading any of Wendy's work reveals these same values as she challenges us to re-orient our understanding of what an academic article is and does. Her chapter "When All Writing is Literature and Student Writing is Creative" offers a clear example of what we might call a "flipped article" (again Wendy's pedagogy and scholarship was well before the term flipped classroom came into popularity). Readers are immediately inside the experience of her pedagogy, as she places her students' writing alongside her own. She fuses pedagogical research with lived experience, insisting on a more embodied approach. As for methodology in both creative writing and composition classrooms, she suggests:

Writing always involves the study of exemplary or expert writing in the forms you hope to learn. But you also need the opportunity to write against and experiment with those forms. *You have to try it to do it* (Bishop 197).

The following lesson plan grows out of this "Try-It" spirit, both for students and for teachers. Recently a colleague asked me about building rapport; he lamented that the buzzwords all sound good in theory—"experiential" "embodied" "hands-on," "active." His question: but *how do you actually do it?* My answer: Not unlike writing, teaching is also about trying it. You have to try it to do it.

## Background and Audience

This lesson is appropriate for any of the following courses: Introduction to Academic Writing, First-Year Seminar, Freshman Composition I or II, Introduction to Creative Writing, Introduction to Literary or English Studies, Advanced Composition, Theories of Teaching Writing, Graduate Teaching in English or English Education. Students should come to class having read the article "When All Writing is Creative and Student Writing is Literature," but even if they haven't prepared as thoroughly as we'd like, this assignment is designed to experientially teach the key findings of the article and to generate helpful discussions about thinking and writing.

### Goals

- To understand existing distinctions between disciplinary fields of creative writing, literature, and composition.
- To generate new, experience-based definitions of creative writing, analytical writing,

professional writing, and academic writing

- To consider what separates student writing from literature
- To study our own writing preferences, beliefs, and practices
- To discuss helpful teaching and learning strategies for writing

### **Discussion and Mapping 10-15 minutes**

Create binaries on a whiteboard, smartboard, or overhead using the terms Creative Writing vs. Academic Writing and Student Writing vs. Literature. Ask the class to generate key words and associations that typically fall under each heading, as seen below:

### **Creative Writing /Academic Writing Student Writing / Literature**

fewer rules	rubrics	novice	Published
voice	more formal	graded	Studied
feeling	analysis	errors	Perfect

Discuss areas of overlap between these divisions. For example, both student writing and literature might be published. Both creative writing and academic writing may involve research. Consider what Bishop's article adds to this discussion. For example, both creative and academic writing are process-based. Both student writing and literature involve an understanding of generic conventions. In Bishop's view, risk-taking and engagement apply equally to creative and critical thinking.

### **Two Writing Prompts 20-25 minutes**

Divide the class into two groups, A and B, and assign two different quotations (below), both of which are lines from Bishop's article. Students should begin with this line. Note: students aren't quoting Bishop (or Bishop's students); they are acting as though this is their own opening line.

- Group A opening line: Is creative writing stuff that you do for fun and composition stuff that your teacher makes you do? That's how it felt in elementary school.
- Group B opening line: Creativity involves risk taking. It's likely that in your past, you were not praised for taking risks.

Subdivide these two groups further so that:

- Group A-Academic will use opening line A to write an *academic/analytical piece*.
- Group A-Creative will use opening line A to write a *creative piece*.
- Group B-Academic will use opening line B to write an *academic/analytical piece*.
- Group B-Creative will use opening line B to write a *creative piece*.

Allow 7-10 minutes for this first writing prompt. Make sure students understand that this is an exercise, a first try, and that they may not be finished when time is called. The purpose is to see what we know intuitively about these genres and to notice our own thinking and writing process as we try it out.

After time is called for Prompt 1, explain that students will now use the same opening line, but this time to write in the other genre. For example, students who first worked on a creative piece will now use the same line to write something more academic or analytically driven. Allow 7-10 minutes for the other genre.

### **Partner Work and Class Discussion 20 minutes**

Pair students with a partner to discuss this experiment. Ideally, a student from A-Academic should pair with a student from B-Creative. This will offer students a chance to learn more about the opening line they weren't assigned. It will also control for variables such as which genre they worked on first or second. Students should trade their writing or read what they've written aloud, then discuss their process. Which piece felt more successful? Which one surprised you the most? Students might also identify new ideas or emerging definitions for the thinking processes used in each. It's unlikely that this discussion will need much prompting. In my experience, this portion of class is extremely lively.

Finish class by returning to the charts made at the beginning. What new ideas have developed as a result of this experiential lesson? Assign a reflective follow-up to be completed as homework. Students may post to an online discussion board or bring their reflections to the next class.

### **Teacher Reflection and Follow-Up Instructions:**

As I hinted above, this lesson was a big hit. I knew it would be interactive and hoped it would help students grasp the article, but it far exceeded these expectations. Students were completely engaged in what Bishop describes as the “messy, generative, exciting process

of writing” (194). For whatever reason, this particular line has stayed with me years beyond graduate school. I’ve even used this quote on syllabi and assignments, and it came to me again—almost in a chill-bumps way—while watching my students so completely immersed in the act of discovery. *The messy, generative, exciting process of writing*. Yes!

As good as I felt about the class, I was even more impressed with students’ follow-up posts, which they submitted a few days later. Reflecting on this distilled experience proved to be as important for them as the experience itself. I will insert, here, the prompt I used. In keeping with my earlier theft of Wendy’s lines, please feel free to steal:

In Thursday’s class, we used the same prompt to write two entries—one creative, one analytical. What did you discover about your own writing through this experience? What takeaways did you glean from your partner in follow-up discussion? Describe your relative comfort with one style over (or in tandem with) another and consider Bishop’s claim that “all writing is creative.”

After processing your experience, think about what these ideas mean in the context of teaching writing. What’s the role of “the creative” in composition classes? What’s the benefit of considering “student writing” alongside “literature?”

## Student Writing

It seems only fitting to focus now on student responses as valuable testimonials and direct evidence for Wendy Bishop’s vision. More than anything else I learned from her, it’s that teaching writing really means *writing alongside your students*, reading them, letting them read you, learning from them as equally as they learn from you. When I think about recent discussions I’ve had with colleagues and students about the advent of ChatGPT, I take comfort in writing that feels authentic, metacognitive, collaborative, and instructive.

Below, I’ve excerpted passages from students (used with permission) that have given me plenty to think about. These students will be delighted to learn that their writing—not unlike literature—was published, and that their words are worthy of study.

From the unlikely English major:

Bishop’s article discusses the problem of students believing that they aren’t worthy to be named a “writer,” that what they write is so much less than “literature.” The constraints students often face when interacting with academic writing, such as research papers and essays, disregard writing as a creative process. This resonated personally with me as I would’ve never guessed in a million years I would be an English major. Growing up, I

enjoyed reading and writing, but never excelled in school. I wasn't a great essay writer, and I never did anything that deserved praise. I accepted my place outside of the discipline. But I finally had a teacher who encouraged us to take risks and encouraged us to lean into the discomfort we felt and do some exploring. He treated us as if we were all equally capable of producing publishable work. I started reading more, writing more, and caring more, and here I am. —Eliza

From a self-professed analytical writer:

In Thursday's class, I came to the realization that I really need to get out of my comfort zone when it comes to writing. I naturally gravitate towards writing in a manner that seems academically correct—always. I was assigned to write creatively first, which I really struggled with. Without realizing, I wrote the creative prompt in a more analytical manner. Honestly, I don't think I wrote creatively at all. And then afterward, when writing analytically, I just used more professional verbiage and somehow making things even more structured than before. Am I really this boring?

When discussing with my partner, I noticed that she took a more anecdotal approach, which I think made her text seem less analytical and created a distinction between the two styles. Her writing was fun, personable, and relatable. I noticed that my writing seemed to only answer the prompt. I learned a lot about potential areas for growth. —Chelsea

From an unabashed creative writer:

Reading my creative piece and then moving to my analysis is a bit funny, honestly. It's like I turned around, put a suit and tie on, slicked my hair back, and turned back to face the audience, ready to lay out some facts and cite some quotes. Lewie and I had a blast conversing and focused mostly on how similar we are in our inability to hush our creativity, humor, and emotion under any circumstances. We never actually read our analyses to each other because we were too busy laughing about how we both wrote intensely dramatic, poetic pieces about risk-taking and creative writing itself. Needless to say, we were both fully immersed —Luca

From students who cultivate the merging of these styles, or who use one genre to think strategically about the other:

From Thursday's class I learned that I have become a better analytical writer than a creative writer. It was kind of sad to realize this, since I fell in love with writing through

the creative writing I did in elementary school. In middle and high school, I still loved creating stories and new approaches with the prompts I was given, and I realize now that this made me a better analytical writer because I would look at these boring papers and still try finding a way to be creative! I think that if students at any level were allowed to release some sort of inner creativity, or allowed their own spin, that both their creative and analytical writing would improve.—Elizabeth

This exercise got me thinking that creative writing and academic writing have a systematic relationship, not a hierarchical one. When we colloquially talk of creative versus academic, we are more speaking about the Inspirational Process versus the Mechanical Process of writing, both in the actual crafting of language and in the crafting of ideas: the fundamental systems employed by the writer.

The Inspirational/Mechanical Processes are more akin to energy sources than anything else, and the writer bounces between them whether writing a post, a school essay, a poem, or a novel. The writer uses the Mechanical Process while integrating quotes but may draw on the Inspirational Process when their integration becomes ineffective or repetitive: they dive into the creative energy to find a new, more unexpected way to craft the language and ideas surrounding this quote. When the movement between these two processes is unconscious and fluid, we feel in the zone. When it's not fluid, we become conscious of the discrepancy and may feel writer's block. —Jacob

The exercise we did in Thursday's class was a surprising challenge. I noticed that writing in separate styles forced me to look at the same topic from more than one angle and with different audiences in mind. In talking to Hailey about this experience, we agreed that it was difficult to mentally switch between the analyzing and creative parts of our minds. I can see that this is a skill writers need to practice in order to weave the two aspects together in a singular piece of writing.

This experience showed me that academic writing and creative writing really shouldn't be taught as completely separate entities. It would be a disservice to student writers to not be allowed to start experimenting with the mixture of analysis and creativity before they get to the college level. It would be like parents who don't let their children cook or try out spicing their own food and exploring flavors. They wonder why kids end up only cooking bland dishes once they move out of the house.

Bishop mentions that "creativity involves risk-taking." What better place for student writers to take risks and try new things with their writing than the classroom? What is a teacher really doing for their students if they don't foster a safe environment for that?

How can a student confidently mix ingredients in new ways if their work keeps coming back to them covered in scolding remarks about criteria and convention errors? —Vacarella

From students who plan to teach:

I want to be a teacher who praises/encourages students to take risks! I remember what it felt like once when a teacher told me I clearly didn't get it, and that I should "try something easier." I had an idea, and though it wasn't perfect, all ideas deserve attention in a writing class, even if you end up throwing it out because that is part of the writing process too. —Sarah

Rather than thinking of the two as separate categories, Bishop believes one should come before the other: "If you are creative before you are careful, you will be more likely to gain an understanding of the writing process of professionals." I think this shows the importance of maintaining "the creative" in composition when teaching writing to students. When students are taught to write in a strict, rubric-driven way, they're being shielded from taking the risks that could make them really grow as writers and invest in the process itself, which most of them come to dread. This activity felt empowering, and I was energized by knowing that it was up to me to feel what was working. I want my future students to use their own instincts. —Ariel

So in teaching writing, maybe teachers should stop giving out super in-depth rubrics and prompts. Let the student read the prompt and use their writing to give the prompt some shape and depth. That way, the teacher may get a new insight instead of receiving what they already know, what they expect, the answers teachers are looking for. —Kennedy

From a rule-breaker:

Ummm...through my experience with responding to the same prompt creatively and analytically, I discovered I need to read prompts more closely. But no matter my oversight, I discovered that I will make any writing prompt my own. Even when I realized I was supposed to be writing something analytical and then something creative, both of my responses took the same form. They failed to be either specifically creative or specifically analytical and became instead what I wanted to write. I even struggled to stay on the topic of creativity, instead finding myself connecting the prompt to some recent experiences. Neither struck me as easier, considering I found it impossible to meet the criteria of both!



The other day I saw a TikTok about how at 5 years old 98% of children met the requirements of being a “creative genius.” By age 10, only about 30% did and by adulthood it was less than 5% (or something.) I think the role of creativity in teaching writing should be fostered. There are also many reasons to consider student writing as literature beyond the fact that they are far more similar than they are different. The most compelling to me is building the confidence of students. Regardless of what a teacher may say to their students, their underlying beliefs come through, and if it’s clear that a teacher doesn’t take their students’ writing seriously, students won’t take their own writing seriously either. —Mo

From a student with big questions about academic voice:

It was easier to get into a state of flow when writing creatively. I got nearly three times more words out in the first write-up compared to the second (which I would attribute to the need I felt to incorporate evidence in the academic writing style). It’s interesting that I naturally associate academic writing with evidence-based style and creative writing with a more intuitive style. If I dig further, I realize that the academic voice that I attempted is neither natural or captivating, and it is certainly not a voice that I ever see myself utilizing outside of academia.

Why do I use it? Who has shaped my understanding of this academic style... one that I think is both boring and impractical? If you take another step, one must wonder: why do we teach students to write with this voice? I don’t even think this is done intentionally, but I also think this is a bigger question than it appears to be on the surface.—Ryan

Even if you only browsed a few of these student samples, it’s easy to detect their level of engagement. These writers are asking interesting questions and courageously posing solutions for themselves, as well as for the educational systems they are a part of. It’s worth noting that these Discussion Posts are entirely credit-based; students receive a 100 for completion if they meet a 250-word count. All students easily wrote much more than this, not simply checking a box to receive a grade. They continued to mention the impact of this assignment all semester long, even referencing it in final projects and on course-instructor evaluations.

Thank you, Ryan, Mo, Kennedy, Ariel, Sarah, Vaccarella, Jacob, Sarah, Elizabeth, Chelsea, Eliza, Luca, and Mo for giving us new ideas about Wendy Bishop’s work and the larger practice of engaged teaching and writing.

## Works Cited

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