

Dear Readers: Thoughts on the
“DEAR MRS. FREEL LETTERS”

Penny Freel, State University of New York-New Paltz



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Dear Readers,

The idea of writing about the *Dear Mrs. Freel Letters* has been percolating for a while. My colleagues have been urging me to write about them, and when Mary Fakler, Joan Perisse, and I presented at the CCCC in March of 2009 on students' publications at SUNY New Paltz, I found that our audience was particularly interested in my idea of students writing letters as a precursor for writing their essays and stories. I struggled, though, not only to find the time to write and to manage course load issues, but also with how and what I should write. Should I try to persuade an audience the letters are worthy of consideration; should I employ the use of authors and their scholarly articles, or should I fly by the seat of my pants? As I sit here still trying to get my thoughts down on paper, I better understand just how much of a struggle it is for many of my students to write their essays. Questions pop up in my mind, and I realize that my questions echo those very queries students pose about writing. What is my purpose? Who is my audience? How should I address the audience? What voice do I use to grab readers' attention? Then I realized the bulk of these concerns echo the very first paragraph of Ede's and Lunsford's essay on *audience addressed* and *audience invoked*. In their opening paragraph, they write:

One important controversy currently engaging scholars and teachers of writing involves the role of audience in composition theory and pedagogy. How can we best define the audience of a written discourse? What does it mean to address an audience? What is the best way to help [writers] recognize the significance of this critical element in any rhetorical situation? (179)

Although Walter J. Ong writes that the idea of “readers” is at best ambiguous, hazy, perhaps even daunting (11), I, on the other hand, have decided to go ahead and write a letter to you. In my mind, you, Dear Readers, are more than mere shadows or fuzzy silhouettes. I have established who you are. Some of you are my dearest friends with whom I met last night at our much too infrequent get-together dinners. Some of you I know well. You are my colleagues at SUNY New Paltz and many of you teach in the Composition Program. Some of you I have seen at conferences. We have said hello to each other in passing, or sat next to each other at presentations or workshops; we have exchanged stories and strategies on teaching. Yet, some of you, though, I have not had the pleasure of meeting (I hope I will), but from the ideas you discuss in your essays on writing and your desire to share ideas about creating better writing classes, I feel we are

compatriots at heart. So, Dear Readers, I will take to heart a graduate professor's answer to my question about how to begin an explication: "begin at the beginning" and will do just that.

A few years ago, when I was still an adjunct, I was asked to teach an ESL/Supplementary Writing Workshop course. I accepted. I had just returned from an eight-year stay in Tokyo, Japan, and had taught at the University of the Sacred Heart, so I thought I would be able to manage an ESL/Supplementary Writing Workshop Composition One at SUNY New Paltz. During one class, a slip of the tongue helped me to create a different approach of getting students to relax and to write. As you know, sometimes a mistake does turn into a blessing. Instead of asking my students to write a ten-minute *response*, I spoke the word "*letter*." A brave but nervous student timidly raised her hand and asked me whom she should write to. It was a good question. I suggested she write to me and the rest of her classmates took it to heart. The first *Dear Mrs. Freel Letters* were penned.

Over the course of the last few years, the *Dear Mrs. Freel Letters* have evolved. Now the letters are no longer only short, in-class responses to an assigned reading or a discussion but have become a large part of my teaching and writing strategy for my Composition One and Composition Two classes. They have taken on much of a life of their own. I am somewhat bemused by the responses from my students on writing letters, and pleased by how the letters have prompted me to rethink voice, audience and purpose—not only for my composition students but also for me—as an instructor who stands in front of the class and tries her best to get students interested in writing.

I agree, perhaps as many of you do, with Elbow's idea that "writing wasn't meant to be read in stacks of twenty-five, fifty, or seventy-five"(204). Journal reading was beginning to wear me down; if I asked students in all my composition classes to write three or more entries a week, I felt obliged to read all of them, make comments, and ask questions. The *Dear Mrs. Freel Letters* are a fine alternative. Realizing I was onto something that could take the place of and would be better than reading too many half-hearted entries, I tweaked Peter Elbow's theory on high and low stakes writing. I incorporated "medium stakes" writing into my course work. While I am all for letting my students experiment with language and form and sound, and getting them comfortable with writing just for the sake of writing, I am always reminded that my first and foremost responsibility is to get my students better able to write clear pieces not only in my class but also across the disciplines. I try not to line edit (but will do so if the letter is chock full of errors), and I have learned always to write back in the form of a letter. A dialogue is created. My students will often, with letter in hand, respond to my comments, or answer a specific question in my reply, or in the next letter include a postscript. Dialogue prompts writing and writing prompts dialogue. This is the crux of my teaching philosophy.

Assessment does matter. The letters count toward 10% percentage of their grade, but they are not as rigidly graded as a take-home or in-class essay. I look at both form and content. Because many of my students lack sound language skills, the letters become another opportunity to improve critical thinking and writing. The very nature of letter writing sets up for a natural transition be-

tween ideas and a built-in organizational code. I urge my students to use the letter format as a way to discover what it is they want to say. Over the course of each semester, students are asked to write six or seven letters based on assigned topics from our readings or our discussions. Often the letters are used as a jumping-off point for essays.

At the beginning of a semester, students seem to ask more questions about letter writing than any other aspect of the Composition Program requirements. This is all down on my syllabus, but students still feel the need for further clarification. Perhaps letter writing is becoming a dying art form, for when I ask them when is the last time they sat down and wrote a letter and not a text message or an email, most students admit they seldom if ever write letters or very seldom receive them (they do mention elders still using the format and college acceptance letters). At least their questions show they are interested! They want to know:

- (1) Do I truly mean it when I say, “write to *Mrs. Freel*”?
- (2) How many words are required?
- (3) How should they sound?
- (4) What do I mean by “*make sure you sign your letter*”?

My answers are quite simple: Yes, use “*Dear Mrs. Freel*” as you salutation; a minimum of 250 words is required (some students stick to this number, but far more students will write three to four pages); sound like yourself; close your letter with, for example, “Sincerely,” or “Yours truly” (students tend to personalize their closing: “Your friend,” “Your birthday twin,” “Love”) and with pen in hand, sign your name. This final action is significant for students to take ownership over their words.

I try to construct topics and questions for a letter only after I listen to what they have to say in class and watch how they react to what I may add to the discussion. Last semester, I asked them to adopt a specific character’s voice (Jacob Jankowski from *Water for Elephants* by Sara Gruen) and write their letter. In the fall of 2007, students read *Into the Wild* by Jon Krakauer, and *Dear Mrs. Freel* asked students to write in the third person just as Chris McCandless did at times in his journal, and to explain to her why they thought McCandless would do so and how they felt to write once removed:

Dear Mrs. Freel,

Hello! The last letter that E. wrote was about how Chris was looking for a special place to be in control of all his actions and how he found that place. Well, E. believes he wrote in third person because he was creating a character, a person he wanted to be. She also wonders if Chris wanted to let the whole world know about his experiences in the wild . . . [because] he documented certain events like food gatherings [sic] and photographs Finally E’s experiences on writing in the third person was [sic] very different. She felt readers might believe her more. With practice, E. believes she can better communicate her ideas She wanted me to tell you she hopes to hear from you soon.

*Sincerely,
E.*

Indeed, for many of our students, the freshman classroom is about finding their voice, both spoken and written. Especially for those of us who teach an ESL Composition class or some form of Composition for Basic Writers or a “regular” Composition class (I dislike the word, “regular”), students need a friendly forum and a user-friendly format for helping them find and strengthen their voice, and to become more comfortable with what Richard Rodriguez terms “public language” (qtd. in Torres). Many of us have students who fall under the category of Generation 1.5--those who have had some years of American schooling but whose families still embrace their native language and who often find it difficult and more challenging to adopt and to adapt the language of the academic community. I am sure I share with you the idea that our students want to prove to themselves and to the larger academic community that they can be an integral part of the communities represented by academic discourse. The letter format seems to be a less threatening form for voicing their ideas. Shonet Newton, a writing tutor and a Graduate Teaching Assistant at SUNY New Paltz, along with a student from one of my Composition Two classes, note respectively:

For the most part, students express that the letters are easier to write because they can say whatever they want without worrying so much about grammar, punctuation, paragraph transitions, or thesis statements. They like the idea that they can just talk about something interesting and enjoy the freedom. Also, the idea of a letter makes the writing seem less formal and academic and allows them to relax when writing rather than worry about how their writing sounds. Often the students seem more invested in writing the letters than they do on essays and do not stress about them the way they do with their essays.

Dear Mrs. Freel,

I will say that, honestly, the letters are more preferred by me than essays. I like the form of letters. It is free for me to write something I am really interested in. Actually, I feel that writing letters are more like chatting with you rather than reporting to you. I do not care so much about the requirement of the word count because when I free write, the words always flow from my mind and arrive on the paper through my hand. In contrast, the essay writing is harder for me. The form is stricter, and more requirements are needed. When I write an essay, I find . . . as if I am taking something heavy on my back. I do better when I write letters. When the mind is open, the ideas cannot stop exploding out. I like that feeling very much.

Yours truly,

J.

Ann Ruggles Gere states “asking them to draw on their own lives allows students to see themselves in conscious ways, to enjoy knowing that they know” (210). Barrett Wendell, a nineteenth century Harvard instructor who daringly allowed his students to write letters to him as part of their composition requirement noted, “Many of my students . . . begin by and by to feel what any sympathetic writer must finally feel: that this human life of theirs, this human life that is particularly theirs, is the source from which they must draw whatever they really have to say” (qtd.

in Simmons 226). I believe the *Dear Mrs. Freel Letters* allow them this opportunity to say what they think and not so much on how they should say it.

We are also aware that many of our composition students are fledglings to the academic community. They may think they know what it is professors in other fields expect or want from them; often, though, they are caught quite unaware and need time and a space to figure things out, or at least mull them over. Many of us might agree with Hjortshoj who writes, “entering students have always had trouble adapting to the unfamiliar standards for writing and reading in higher education”(30), and have students who express their worries to us in a similar manner as follows:

Dear Mrs. Freel,

After this long second semester of my first year in college, I am tired. I am tired of writing papers, doing homework, and studying for tests. I am tired of waking up early and having to go to class. I knew college would be more work then [sic] high school, and that classes would be a lot different, and for the most part I think I have adjusted very well. Nevertheless, it has taken me a lot of effort to adjust and learn how to manage my time and my new workload . . . I am tired of all the stress that comes with school. I am an over achiever and have always done well in school so not doing well is unacceptable. I put a lot of pressure on myself . . . but sometimes what is my best does not please me. Also, I am not good at much, like some people who have skills in a sport or art or music but I lack any skill in those areas. There are things I enjoy, such as dancing, but I have not done that in so long . . .

Sincerely yours,

A.

Just as we are supposed to develop our core body muscles for better physical health, many of our students need to strengthen their core English skills muscles, so how do we address these basic writing issues without becoming preachy and bossy? How do we get students to feel they can, just as Ali does in Lehrer’s and Sloan’s *Crossing the Blvd.: Strangers, Neighbors, Aliens in a New America*, “make something out of nothing?” How might we foster a confidence in our students to create writing that expresses their own singular views, to help them realize the what/ could/ might be said? How might we, to follow in the footsteps of Barrett Wendell, “help students think of themselves as writers . . .and to abandon the empty voice of the ‘indefinite anybody’ and write instead of their own experiences”(qtd. in Simmons 335-342)? How might we get students to relax and to find time to dance, not just literally but also with words? Here is how two students interpret the letter writing experience:

Dear Mrs. Freel,

A letter is so much easier than an essay from a student’s point-of-view. I believe this to be because of the informality inherent in the letters. A letter isn’t as tough, as say, an academic essay. Essays have less meaning than a well- written letter; granted they are needed for college level work. Letters are a great way for students to pour out their actual thoughts and not just reasons and examples. This is a chance for students to “speak from the heart.” Also, less

academic language may be used in a letter to get across a point that can still be understood . . . I believe students need to write about their views and learn to express themselves.

*Sincerely,
B.*

Dear Mrs. Freel

Letters have no boundaries. It is similar to using our thoughts and writing them down as they build up within our minds. I think one of the biggest issues a writer faces when typing an essay or writing one is that there is fear of writing the wrong information or not stating our information properly.

*Sincerely,
E.*

Like many of you, I discuss audience, purpose and voice quite early in the semester (usually at the second lecture), because it is necessary for students to understand the objectives/goals of our respective Composition Programs in general, but also our individual objectives for our writing courses. Whether I am introducing or reviewing rhetoric, I am mindful of how important it is for me to be just as aware of it, not only when I speak in class but also when I write to students about their essays, responses, or write letters to them on their letters. Speaking is different from writing. When asked to do a presentation, a student sees the audience in front of her; the audience is a specific number of classmates; she sees their faces, she can gage their reaction, and she could possibly alter what, how, and in what way she voices her ideas. When I ask my students about *audience for their writing*, they find it difficult to answer. They respond in muddled fashion, defining audience as “other professors,” an “elite group” of readers, a “community of readers,” or even with the murkier phrase as “somebody out there.” As Ong notes, students create a fictionalized audience; they are “cast in some sort of role . . . as entertainment seekers, or reflective sharers of experiences” (12). Ong continues:

A writer’s audience is [her] readers and readers do not form a collectivity, acting here and now on one another and on the speaker as members of an audience can do. . . The student is not talking. [She] is writing, No one is listening. There is no feedback. Where does [she] find [her] “audience”? [She] has to make [her] readers up, fictionalize them. (11)

I would like to think the *Dear Mrs. Freel Letters* have helped to somewhat alleviate the problem of conjuring up and/or defining audience. Although I still find I am part of that murky body that composes many of my students’ ideas on audience and essay writing, I am also *Dear Mrs. Freel*, the gentle receiver of letters. In “Closing My Eyes As I Speak” Peter Elbow asserts, “it’s not that writers should never think about their audience. It’s a question of when. An audience is a field of force. . . The practical question, then, is always whether a particular audience functions as a helpful field of force or one that confuses us”(198).

I asked another writing tutor, Thomas Doran, a Graduate Teaching Assistant who also teaches a composition course, his thoughts on why the letters are met with such enthusiasm. Although he is

the writing tutor for my ESL/SWW class, his remarks hold true for my other courses as well. He explains:

Yes! I do think the letters' primary rhetorical lesson has to do with audience. The fact that I was working specifically with your ESL class might color my impression of the letters a bit beyond that though. Yes, I did see a shift in *audience addressed/invoked*, and students seemed more casual, but these particular students didn't always have that firm grasp of formal/informal written English. . . . The distinctions between academic prose and casual prose in written English seem rather unimportant to students who are also learning the language. The letters address this issue. . . . I like that the letters are transitional; they bridged the gap between communicating directly and the more nebulous affair of academy writing. Practically speaking, the letters helped me discuss issues like colloquialism, cliché, and other things. . . . The audience for the work is clear, but also the point of the writing is clear to the students. I think that's the driving force behind letters; they should be intrinsically motivating, and students should not have to seek out the real purpose (beyond a grade) of these writings. They should just see it right there.

Many of my students find it difficult to speak up and out, let alone write for an academic community, and I believe it is even more difficult for my ESL/SWW students to bridge the gap between an academic and a general audience. When I see my ESL students out and about on campus, I hear them speaking English in a much more relaxed fashion. In class it is often a different story, for the gap can be likened to a silent chasm. If I want composition students to begin brainstorming for an essay assignment, I ask first for a general spoken response. For example, one student commented on how difficult the vocabulary was in an assigned reading. After we discussed the words in question, I asked each student for his/her favorite new English word, and was offered *Chatty-Cathy*, *scurvy*, *vague*, *chop-chop*, etc. This in-class discussion helped me to create the next *Dear Mrs. Freel Letter* for all my composition classes, to write about your favorite word, and went hand-in-hand with our classroom discussions and assigned readings on the power of words. Students were then given the option to use the letter as a working rough draft for their informational essay. I believe the gap between personal writing and writing for an academic audience does decrease because students tend to be more at ease with their topic. They have had the opportunity to speak, to write a letter (sometimes writing multiple drafts), and then transform the letter into an academic essay.

Walter J. Ong suggests a "reader has to play the role in which the author has cast [her], which seldom coincides with [her] role in the rest of actual life"(12), but I will beg to differ. I can shed the instructor persona and easily slip on the persona my letter writer has offered me. Although it is true my students may not know what kind of mood I am in on the day I read their letter, and they need to "confect a mood [I] am most likely to be in" (19), I am more than willing to read a letter I know a student has spent time and thought on and to accept the role she/he has accorded me. For the most part, *Dear Mrs. Freel* tries to be unflappable, but she does react. Just as I ask my students to think about voice, I also make an effort to construct a voice – reflected in my

teaching style and in my replies to their letters that are at times comforting, empathetic, strict, patient, no-nonsense, scolding (sometimes!). For example:

Dear C.,

For a student who thinks in metaphor and creates such wonderful and powerful pieces, your ideas are diminished by the Oh! so many comma and grammatical errors. C., you told the class once you dislike using commas, but learn either to love them or at least tolerate them! As for the noun/pronoun goofs, stop switching from singular to plural or back again. Mrs. Freel eagerly awaits rereading this letter after you make amends. Take care.

C's last letter succinctly addresses my tone:

Dear Mrs. Freel,

. . . . The Mrs. Freel Letters helped . . . by the quality of being abrasive yet not so demanding. The letters help me write at ease without really worrying about my grammatical errors, yet making me aware that certain things should not be there. For example, a comma should not be after certain words like but, because, and others. The commas are supposed to be before these words, or when listing more than two things, and even after introductory phrases. Am I right, Mrs. Freel? I take that as a yes, because I know for a fact you are smiling. The Mrs. Freel Letters made me feel like I was writing to a concerned friend Indeed, this makes me smile.

*Sincerely,
C.*

I have learned to revise the voice I use in the classroom on any given day, and have adjusted my writing voice as needed as well. The letters allow the students to experiment with creating powerful voices, which, in turn, help to better create voices that are turned outward to be "heard" and appreciated by a larger audience. They get their share of egocentric writing and then are asked by me to transpose the personal into a more outwardly encompassing framework and style.

Mrs. Freel,

I absolutely love writing Dear Mrs. Freel Letters. I feel completely non-threatened by them because they allow me to use my voice. Like many people, I enjoy writing about 'me.' You, Mrs. Freel, are the other half of the letters. . .

*Sincerely,
L.*

Dear Mrs. Freel,

I agree that the Dear Mrs. Freel letters are overall much easier to write than typical, standard essays given out in class. When I write my letters, they come from the heart and I write them with ease and comfort. I do not have to worry about every miniscule detail. Everything flows out so easily and I love telling my side of the story. Typical essays are so formatted and structured. These characteristics are what fit most aspects of education in today's society. It

seems that in many cases, there is no room for a lot of personal touch to an essay. Most educators want us to write what we need to write about and finish. I feel that we do not get to show our true personalities thorough our writing anymore. But the Dear Mrs. Freel Letters do help tremendously. I loved discussing my personal life and my interests in these assignments. They go much quicker and the content is much more substantial . . .

*Yours truly,
K.*

Dear Mrs. Freel,

The letters give us a way to express our ideas; it is all just us, our thoughts. To be able to express myself so freely is a nice change from worrying about all the points that I have to go out of my way to make in an essay. But, I cannot complain about the essays, though. The letters helped a lot. I take what I write in a letter and then do more research and it allows me to create a much more powerful statement on the subject.

*From,
J.*

We, Dear Readers, are a complex lot. There are many parts to a whole, and I, along with you, define us as more than just instructors of composition. I am also a mother, a wife, a sister, an aunt, a friend, a colleague, a confidant, a gardener, a reader, a tennis player, and now *Dear Mrs. Freel*. While I did not deliberately set out to create a separate identity, my students have done so for me. As letter assignments grew in detail, so did my realization of how my students have differentiated me, the instructor, from, me, the reader of the letter.

Dear Mrs. Freel,

First, we want to start by hoping that you are good and everything is going well in your life. As usual, this time I want to tell you about what we had to do for our Freshman Composition class. Our teacher came up with a great idea where we had to collaborate and write a one-act play . . .

*Love,
J. & K.*

Dear Mrs. Freel,

How is everything going? I feel tired because this week is so busy When our instructor assigned the article to read, maybe she wanted us to know the power of books or even words . . . I believe we can succeed if we learn from the past and our mistakes. Do you agree with me?

*Yours truly,
A. L.*

This differentiation was made all the more apparent during this past semester. I had asked students for possible topics and questions for their final examination and in one particular class, I realized just how much of a separate entity *Dear Mrs. Freel* had become. I asked students to

work in small groups to come up with possible topics and questions for their final examination and to present them to the class. Of course, I heard from students who thought multiple choice, word bank, or short answers would be fine. Other questions were so difficult that students moaned and groaned, but two groups stood out when they suggested the following:

A) In *Water for Elephants* by Sara Gruen, Jacob struggles through life. His parents have died and he has jumped on to a circus train. He now has to live with his decision. Write a letter to Jacob and give him advice with coping with his decisions and how to learn from his mistakes.

B) Write a letter answering these questions: Is Mrs. Freel different from Professor Freel? How so? Who is it easier to write to? Who is the harder grader? If you could choose one of the Freel's to write for, which one would you choose? Explain using details from class and the critiques that are on your papers. Format: Dear Mrs. Freel Letter—850 words.

You can see why both questions were met with approval, especially the second choice. We have all experienced “moments” in our classrooms, but for me, once the hubbub and commotion died down from the latter suggestion, the class became truly memorable. My students began to speak about the differences between Professor Freel and *Dear Mrs. Freel* as if I were not present. They bandied back and forth using “she” and “her” without so much of a glance my way. They were discussing me, both Professor Freel and *Dear Mrs. Freel*, in the third person. It was extremely odd. And, one more thought. Take a look at this letter and notice how I have italicized *Dear Mrs. Freel* throughout and occasionally use “she” and “her” to refer to me. It is safe to say that, now, even I foster and nurture the difference and have begun to think of *Dear Mrs. Freel* as a friendly doppelganger. In class, when I speak about letter assignments and of letter writing, I speak of her and not of me. When I post letter assignments on our Blackboard site, I now begin with, “Explain to *Dear Mrs. Freel* why or how . . .”

Dear Readers, you probably can guess what the format for the final exam was.

I did give my blessing for them to write a letter, for my students throughout the semester had drafted and written short responses, six letters, three essays, a one-act play, two in-class essays, and an argument research paper, so why not allow them to end the semester and be able to write in a manner and way that they found enjoyable? Some of the excerpts in this letter are from their final letters to me, which I have enjoyed sharing with you. I opened this letter with Ede's and Lunsford's idea on *audience addressed* and *audience invoked*. I would like to think that the *Dear Mrs. Freel Letters* espouse both aspects and that my students are now learning to adjust and to appreciate just how “intricate the relationship of writer and audience is” (Ede and Lunsford 193). I would like to think that writing to *Dear Mrs. Freel* comes close to “talking to the perfect listener . . . who allows her students to feel smart and come up with ideas they didn't know they had” (Elbow 199). Well, perhaps not the “perfect” listener, but one who does try her best.

So, Dear Readers, I will end my letter with one last letter excerpt, I feel, “speaks” the truth about how many of our composition students feel about their writing. He notes:

Dear Mrs. Freel,

. . . . I am not great at big flowery sentences, and I am not the best with all the Modern Language Association rules. What I am good at is talking to someone and conveying a message. I find if I am allowed to be more personal and I don't have to be as formal and do not have so many restrictions, I find it easier to 'talk'.

From,

J.

P.S. I've enjoyed the Dear Mrs. Freel Letters more than any other writing in my academic career. I've had a wonderful time.

Take care, Dear Readers. I am pleased to have finally been able to sit down and share my reflections with you about students in Composition, about my own re-visioning of how to enable students to become more invested in their writing, and of course, about the *Dear Mrs. Freel* Letters. Stay well. Be happy. I hope to hear from you soon.

As always,

Penny Freel

Penny Freel

Aka *Dear Mrs. Freel*

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