Integrating Writing in the Classics Classroom

by Alison C. Traweek

In a 2015 interview with the *Chronicle for Higher Education*, prolific scholar Anthony Grafton showed a reluctance to call himself a writer that surprised many readers: "I've never felt I could claim to be a writer in that full sense" he confessed (Toor, 2015). I have heard similar admissions from many of my friends and colleagues in classics; we see ourselves as teachers and researchers, not as writers. When we stop to consider our work, though, it is obvious that writing makes up an enormous part of our workload: we write not just articles, abstracts, books, and book reviews, but also course descriptions, syllabi, letters of recommendation, grant proposals, and those 'statements of research interest' that haunt job candidates annually. Whether or not we feel comfortable claiming the label 'writer', writing is, undeniably, a central part of our professional lives.

Very few of us, however, can remember being explicitly taught to write. Instead, we pick it up along the way, often haphazardly, and frequently without conscious awareness of the structures and conventions we are absorbing and adapting. Moreover, many of those same accomplished scholars who share Grafton's discomfort with the title 'writer' continue to feel anxiety about their writing habits and skills well past the point of proving them; writing is almost seen as an accident, a side-product, the required medium for the dissemination of ideas but not our 'real' work. We often teach it

this way too, intentionally or not, by asking students to treat writing less as a structured practice than as a site for the demonstration of knowledge.

When asked to teach writing, as nearly all of us in classics are at some point, we are often unsure exactly what that means or how to do it – what kinds of assignments work best, and what we want our students to learn from them. We are very good at using writing to support and assess students' development in and command over the content of our classes, often coming up with creative assignments that allow students to engage directly with primary sources.[1] It is less obvious to many people, however, how we can use the content of our classes – the ancient history and literature that we love – to help our students learn to write. As a classicist who has been teaching in a writing program for five years, I have a foot in both worlds, and I have come to see that the teaching of our modes of disciplinary knowledge production – that is, teaching students *how to be classicists* – closely mirrors many of the strategies that are effective for supporting writing instruction, and thus that the two aims can reinforce each other.[2] In this paper, I will show how the familiar work of teaching classics can actively facilitate our students' acquisition of effective writing skills.

A note on theory first. It has long been known that writing reinforces content knowledge in every field, but the 'writing in the disciplines' model of

writing pedagogy exploits the ability of content-learning to support writing development as well.[3] For example, when students are taught to be conscious of the questions shaping the writing done in classics, they are more likely to successfully transfer this awareness of writing practices to other writing contexts in their academic and professional lives.[4] Just as teaching writing supports learning classics, then, so teaching classics can support learning writing. Of course, classics is a broad field, and there is no single or standardised approach to classics pedagogy. Nonetheless, there are shared tools and assumptions governing research and knowledge-production across the field, such as reliance on close reading, attention to context (both our own and that of antiquity), and sensitivity to intertextual relationships. It is precisely onto the teaching of these skills and stances that writing instruction can be grafted.

In the first place, since most of us work extensively with textual sources, close, attentive reading is fundamental to almost everything we do, and certainly everything we write. While the field as a whole has moved away from the formal philology and textual criticism of earlier eras, a great deal of study and scholarship still revolves around analysis of the syntactic and semantic linguistic features of our sources; indeed, even highly abstract and theoretical scholarship is premised on close readings of the secondary literature corpus, if not the

primary. It is natural and practical, therefore, that we ask our students to do close readings in turn, and it is important for supporting writing instruction that we have them subject secondary sources to the same kinds of textual analysis they apply to Ovid and Euripides.

Moreover, since it is not always clear to students how good reading habits relate to good writing skills, there must be an active emphasis on texts, both primary and secondary, not only as vehicles of content, but as species of writing. In a writing seminar, this may take the shape of having students read and outline scholarly articles and books in order to highlight strategies of logic and rhetoric that they can then imitate in their own writing. Even in a dedicated classics class, though, which may have little room for additional assignments and readings of this sort, expanding discussions of course readings to explicitly address writerly features – logical arrangement, how diction reveals expectations of audience, kinds of evidence used, and so forth – is a natural way that teaching content can support the teaching of writing: as students learn to read like writers, they will acquire both knowledge of classics and knowledge of writing. This is particularly true when this work of textual analysis is applied to different genres, so that students begin to develop awareness of writing contexts.[5] We as professionals understand very clearly that different writing contexts require different approaches – cover letters and book reviews and academic articles are all species of writing, but with distinct goals, purposes, and conventions that shape them in different ways. While this feels obvious to us, it is often a new idea to students. To be most useful, discussions of genre should be incorporated into the class from the beginning; along with the class discussion about a reading's content and argument; for instance, reflection on the writer's rhetorical choices and strategies can be added: What kinds of evidence are used? Does the author use the first person? How explicit is she with signposting or handling of previous scholarship? Studying professional examples of different genres provides students with the technical vocabulary with which to analyse writing in the field of classics, which in turn prepares them to compose, evaluate, and effectively revise their own work and that of their

peers in terms of the discipline's conventions.

However, if the discussion is limited to only academic articles and books, students may fail to grasp the fundamental premise that different writing contexts require different writing practices. It is essential, therefore, to also include other genres of writing in the classics that the students can study and perform. Many articles are preceded by abstracts, for instance; students can reflect on the purpose and conventions of the abstract in small groups, and then compose an abstract for their own essays or for the scholarly articles they are reading.[6] Students might also be asked to compose both an abstract and a position piece, and to articulate how the genres differ in purpose, audience, structure, and style. This exercise can be applied equally successfully to both primary and secondary sources: students might sketch the parameters of the genre of the book review after reading several samples, for instance, or they might explain how Ovid's *Metamorphoses* strikes a balance between adherence to, and explosion of, the constraints of epic. What is important is that they see how the authors' perception of purpose, structure, and audience shape the text that is ultimately produced – that they continue to read like a writer in order to become more conscious writers.

Furthermore, this awareness of how purpose, structure, and audience shape any given piece of writing helps disabuse students of the idea that the five-paragraph essay written to the nearly omniscient teacher is the sum of what 'academic writing' means – a particular problem for freshmen coming from years of training for standardised tests. This broader conception of writing can be bolstered by having students write to, or imagine writing to, different audiences: how would their papers need to change if they were directed to other students in the class, or to their roommates, or to their parents? One of the most important things we can do in teaching writing is make students aware of the fact that there is no single approach to writing that will work for every situation, but that the nuances and needs of specific situations are the ultimate shapers of any successful piece of writing. Helping students understand how to be careful and thoughtful readers will help them gain

control of the questions that will underlie their own work as writers.

This introduces a second realm in which the teaching of classics is naturally aligned with the teaching of writing: both require a great sensitivity to context. It is the rare Latinist who teaches Virgil without some discussion of Augustan politics, for instance, and an unusual Hellenist who would teach Homer without discussing oral poetics. After all, the tensions of the *Eclogues* are as confusing and disorienting as the formulae and repetitions in the *Iliad* unless we help students understand the social forces not only behind each composition, but even behind the reception of each in its literary landscape. Moreover, this context is a large part of what provides the historical knowledge they need to master in order to effectively analyse both the ancient texts and the scholarship about them.

Indeed, one of the simplest ways to facilitate the transfer of this important work of source criticism to their own cognitive work as writers is to demonstrate how those same questions of context that shape the primary sources affect secondary literature as well. This can be accomplished as part of the generic analysis discussed above – for instance, by comparing Mary Beard's academic work to her writing at *A Don's Life*, identifying and explaining the rhetorical differences, and speculating about what governs them. Students might also compare older scholarship with more recent work: how do Theodor Mommsen's premises about Rome compare to those of Ronald Syme, or those of Thomas Habinek? How does Ulrich von Wilamowitz-Möllendorf's approach to Homeric interpretation differ from Milman Parry's, and Parry's in turn from Egbert Bakker's?

By means of this comparative work of secondary sources as examples of writing, students will develop a deeper understanding of the field of classics as an evolving discourse community – an important end in its own right, certainly, but one that carries important implications for the teaching of writing as well. It can be difficult for students to grasp the idea of specialised common knowledge, for instance, but these comparative readings can illustrate how knowledge is contested and created within the field, and how, over time, hypothesis

can become accepted fact. Similarly, students can see how citation practices have changed over time, and reflect on what social forces have prompted or supported those changes.

This comparative and contextual work leads to a third area in which the teaching of classics and the teaching of writing are mutually reinforcing: intertextuality. The study of how ancient texts are engaging with each other has been an enormously productive site of inquiry in the field, and it is a particular pleasure to help students develop sensitivity to these subtle (and sometimes not so subtle) points of contact between and among our sources. Students can see, for instance, how Sophocles in his *Electra* is playing on the audience's familiarity with Aeschylus' treatment of the same myth in the *Oresteia*, or how Seneca's *Medea* responds to the legacy of Euripides' influential tragedy.

These moments of textual interaction reveal the social dynamics of ancient literature and ancient culture more broadly, but it is not always obvious to students that similar dynamics govern nearly all species of writing, including critical writing. There are several ways of drawing students' awareness to this. For instance, students might choose a source from one of the central scholarly texts of the class and then present on the argument of the piece itself as well as its use in the central text. The second component of the presentation, explicating how the central author used the presented source, is particularly important: because students frequently perceive writing and reading both as solitary activities, it is not always easy for them to see that there is, in fact, a bustling discourse community underlying all that silent text. Becoming cognisant of this fact allows students to view writing as a part of an ongoing dialogue rather than a series of isolated and disconnected productions. Even when a student knows that her own piece will likely have no impact beyond adding points to her final course grade, conceptualising writing as potentially participating in the discipline-wide goal of expanding our base of knowledge helps her understand writing as the profoundly social act it is.

Another avenue into this consciousness of writing as a social act can be opened by giving students articles that are explicitly in dialogue with each other. The long-lasting dispute between Martin Bernal and Mary Lefkowitz over Afro-Asiatic influence on Hellenic culture, for instance, illustrates how scholarship can be so explicitly communal that it threatens to become an *ad hominem* battle, but there are plenty of more collegial examples, such as the influence of Helene Foley's article on reverse-sex similes in the *Odyssey* or, indeed, the shadow of Alessandro Barchiesi on how classicists think about intertextuality. Helping students see scholars as engaged together in a communal practice reminds students that writing, though often practised alone, is not monologue but dialogue.

It can be more difficult to help students perceive the dialogic nature of their own writing, as they are novices simply by virtue of being students, and thus rarely experts in the field, and rarely qualified to participate fully in the discourse community at the professional level – as they well know, and often feel too deeply. In other words, it is unlikely that students will see the writing which they produce for class becoming part of the larger scholarly dialogue, especially in lower level courses. However, this can be mitigated by circumscribing a smaller discourse community to which the students should direct their writing: the class itself. This specialised community within the classroom is reinforced by peer review exercises, through which students are not only given practice in writing to a specific audience (classmates), but also receive real evaluation from within their unique community of specialised non-specialists.

Studies have shown that peer review actually carries benefits not present in teacher review, and is much more than simply a method of reducing the time- and energy-intensive grading that writing instruction requires.[7] For one thing, peer review reinforces the work of generic analysis by allowing students an opportunity to evaluate and assess a work that may be more accessible to them in terms of length and content than published articles are. That is, it can be much less daunting to identify and assess the argument of a classmate with a similar level of knowledge than to break down that of a scholar who has been studying the subject for years or even decades. In addition, peer review replicates the real-world experience of professional writing: none of our writing happens in a vacuum, but we often assign writing in ways that suggest it is a fundamentally isolated and private affair, such as the one-off in-class essay or the unrevised final paper. Other benefits of peer review include the experience of having an actual human audience on the other end of their paper, the practice of engaging in writing as a social act, and personal investment in the class and in classmates in a way that discussion alone cannot always engender.

Peer review combined with an emphasis on the intertextual nature of both secondary and primary sources can also create space for teaching writing as process rather than the one-and-done practice that many students are accustomed to performing, often up against deadlines.[8] With peer review, however, students are confronted with the fact that first drafts are rarely perfect, and given feedback about where to focus revisions. Were they unable to successfully anticipate their reader's objections and counter-arguments? Were the evidence and reasons used overly familiar to someone possessing a similar level of exposure to the field? Here the peer is a more useful reader than the teacher, in some ways, because of the comparable level of knowledge shared between classmates; it is a very different and less anxiety-provoking task to produce new knowledge for a classmate with similar experience with the material than to feel pressure to do the same for the teacher, an expert.

Peer review can be formal or informal, and it is useful to vary the format depending on the stage of development the student is in. At the early stages, informal peer review is often best. For instance, while students are initially developing their research topics, each student might present her basic idea and argument to a small group, and then field questions and objections, and receive suggestions and insight on her work before going on to respond to the work of her colleagues in kind. In later stages, when there is extended prose to work with, it makes sense to turn to more formal peer review. For formal peer review, the book review provides a useful model: students can recall how reviewers balance summary of content with analysis of logical and rhetorical effectiveness, for example, and use that as a template for how they should address both issues as objectively as possible in their analyses of their classmates' work.

Additionally, peer review is, by its very nature, a forward-looking exercise: the ostensible purpose of providing feedback is to pave the way for improvements by providing the writer with some ideas for revisions. In other words, peer review reinforces an approach to writing as process. In practice, as we know all too well, professional writing requires frequent feedback and revision at every stage. This process demands time – time to develop ideas, time to allow colleagues to respond to them, and time to rework drafts and incorporate reader responses – as much as it demands a living, breathing reader on the other end. Peer review can thus be a natural way of building in stages to student writing assignments.

The traditional research paper assignment can easily be adapted to suit this model of integrating writing instruction into the fabric of the semester: in the first few weeks of the semester, students might develop central questions in response to the class topic, ideally with some time in class to brainstorm topics in small groups – which has the added benefit of solidifying content knowledge. Once students have settled on central questions that interest them, they can devote several weeks to guided research, in collaboration with other students as well as on their own. When they have familiarised themselves with the topic, they can organise their evidence and argument into an outline which they present to the class or to small groups. This gives them the opportunity to reflect on the best structure for their purpose and to hear feedback before they have become invested in formal prose. Once students have circumscribed their main argument and incorporated peer feedback, they can expand their outline into an essay. In addition to instilling in students a consciousness of the process of writing, these stages and collaborations also serve to reinforce content knowledge and comprehension. As students spend time with the material, developing and revising their own ideas and responding to the ideas of others, their understanding of the subject becomes more nuanced and considered. Furthermore, the additional time spent wrestling with the issues increases the likelihood that they will retain the content knowledge they are writing about, allowing them to be more engaged in and better prepared for future classes in the field.

Integrating thoughtful and effective writing instruction into the classics classroom need not result in a bifurcated classroom, nor do we as classicists need to feel insecure about the task: as I have shown, our familiar disciplinary practices as literary critics and analysts of historical and material culture have prepared us well for the work. There is, moreover, one thing that we bring to the teaching of writing that is unique to classics: our field includes the earliest texts of the western rhetorical tradition. That is, we already teach the ancient Greco-Roman world, Aristotle and Cicero, Quintilian and Longinus, Isocrates and Tacitus; we can exploit this coincidence to the good of both our content and our writing instruction. Obviously most classes will not have room for extensive readings from *de sublimitate*, but as classicists we have an opportunity in teaching writing to help our students connect their own academic work with the actual practices of the ancient world.[9]

Often, this is quite straightforward, such as relating the importance of invention and revision to Quintilian's tenets of *inventio* and *correctio*. Other times it is more subtle, but potentially more useful, such as reminding students that writing is not some mysterious, innate talent bestowed on the muse-blessed, but a practical skill, as Aristotle makes clear when he treats rhetoric and poetic as *technai*. When we introduce Cicero's elegant use on the *tricolon ascendens*, we might also point to places in contemporary scholarship that rely on the same device. What is important is to take advantage of the natural melding of writing and classics content instruction that our field offers us, to let students see that the separation of the two into distinct areas of study is unnecessary, and that classics is, in fact, deeply relevant to the communication strategies students are trying to master today.

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[1] See, for instance, Lefkowitz, 2005, where she details an assignment for which students must write brief introductions for primary sources in the style of a sourcebook.

Anderson and Dix, 2008, present exercises similar to the *progymnasmata* of antiquity (see especially 453).

[2] I am focused in this paper on teaching writing in English in classical civilisation courses and classics-in-translation courses, although much of it will apply as well to English writing instruction in Greek and Latin language classes. On incorporating Greek and Latin composition into language classes, see J. Gruber-Miller, 2006.

[3] For an overview of the history of writing instruction in the United States, where I teach, as well an explanation of how the 'writing in the disciplines' model of writing instruction teaches content while using content-learning to teach writing, see I. Clark and D. R. Russell, 2014.

[4] On the relationship of writing instruction and knowledge transfer, see E. Wardle, 2007.

[5] For more on the theory and practice of teaching genres, see I. L. Clark and A. Hernandez, 2011; A. Devitt, 2008; R. Larson, 2000; A. Rounsaville, 2012; M. Soliday, 2011; and E. Wardle, 2009.

[6] On effectively facilitating collaborative work for writing instruction, see R. M. Howard, 2001.

[7] For a theory of why peer review is effective, see N. Graff, 2009. E. West, 2008, offers reflections on using peer review specifically in the context of a classics class.

[8] J. Bloodgood, 2002, is mostly focused on primary education, but does provide a brief description and bibliography of writing instruction directed at writing process (see especially 31).

[9] J. Bloodgood, 2002, A. Bourelle, 2009, and J. Davis, 2000, in fact, offer specific, practical methods of teaching writing in accordance with Quintilian's pedagogical model.