

By Stephen Winton

## Writing Through the Lens of Beers and Probst's *Notice & Note*



In my work as an instructional coach for Houston Independent School District, I have experienced the power of Kyleene Beers and Bob Probst's seminal texts *Notice & Note: Strategies for Close Reading* (2012) and *Reading Nonfiction: Notice & Note Stances, Signposts and Strategies* in exploring author's craft (2016). The signposts offer specific and tangible author's craft moves to notice, leading to complex analysis.

As I began to plan curriculum for a unit of writing lessons, I thought, "If the signposts are author's craft choices found again and again in published texts, could we not use these to teach writing?" A quick Google search showed that I was not the first to think of this, as Tara Smith (2014) explores utilizing *Notice & Note* fiction signposts in writing memoir. Her work shows how

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Writing through *Notice & Note* should not become a formulaic replacement of the five paragraph essay, a worksheet students are expected to dutifully fill, but rather serve as a way of thinking about possibilities as a writer.

effective the specificity of the signposts are in making the reading and writing connection and thinking purposefully about choices as a writer.

The signposts from *Reading Nonfiction* offer the possibility of augmenting our toolkit when approaching the complex task of writing nonfiction. Students struggle more with expository and persuasive writing than narrative, as data from the State of Texas Assessment of Academic Readiness (STAAR) show. Fifty-seven percent of students scored above a 4 out of 8 points on the seventh grade personal narrative task compared to forty-two percent for the expository writing task on the 2013 STAAR, when the personal narrative was still tested (Young, 2014). As storytelling is part of

our daily experience, narrative is natural to human beings, whereas essay writing requires a complex ordering of ideas and evidence.

Indeed, the challenge that students face in essay writing illustrates the need for the reading and writing connection. Many have written that learning from published texts is essential for writing in the genre (Anderson, 2000; Atwell, 1998; Lattimer, 2003). John O’Flahavan’s (2012) Consume, Critique, Produce model suggests that in order to write effectively, one first reads numerous texts to discover what the genre must have, might have, and won’t have, then approaches texts through the lens of a critic, before writing texts of one’s own. Similarly, Katie Wood Ray (2006) in *Study Driven* suggests periods of immersion in texts of the genre, close study, then writing under the influence. A key phrase of Wood Ray’s is “Before revision, vision” (p. 35). If writers have not read extensively and critiqued a genre, they have no vision for what their writing might be.

A challenge in such an inquiry-based model, especially for new teachers, is the ambiguity. Simply handing students a study stack and asking what they are noticing can fail without expert scaffolding. A bridge between a pure Consume, Critique, Produce model and traditional formulaic writing instruction can be found by first exploring texts through the *Notice & Note* signposts, then using the signposts for purposeful choices in writing.

In addition to learning from published texts, teachers should model the writing process by writing beside students, making their thinking visible as they plan, draft, revise, edit, and publish (Kittle, 2008). I made a rule for myself many years ago that everything I asked my students to write, I would write myself and think aloud about my writing process.

As I planned a curriculum unit on expository reading and writing, I explored the *Reading Nonfiction* signposts of Contrasts and Contradictions, Extreme or Absolute Language, Quoted Words, and Numbers and Stats in published texts, then used these moves to model writing.

In building a text set, authentic pieces that are engaging and relevant to students are key; short texts are often beneficial so that students may consume many examples of the genre (Harvey

& Goudvis, 2007). I included many examples of National Public Radio’s *This I Believe* essays such as Sarah Adam’s (2005) “Be Cool to the Pizza Delivery Dude.” These short speeches, sometimes-humorous, often moving, are not only accessible to students, but they also serve as excellent models for the expository writing task on STAAR.

After exploring the texts through an interactive read-aloud with Beers and Probst’s signposts, students might annotate their texts to track their thinking. For example, Contrasts and Contradictions states:

When you’re reading and the author shows you a difference between what you know and what is happening in the text, or a difference between two or more things in the text, you should stop and ask yourself,

“What is the difference and why does it matter?” (2016, p. 123).

Here, students might write a CC next to Contrasts and Contradictions they are noticing and explore why they think the author included this or what the effect is on the reader. Thinking ahead to composition, it might be good for students to record quotations from their reading as examples of the signposts in their writer’s notebooks, later to serve as models as they draft (see Figure 1).

After exploring the texts through the *Notice & Note* signposts, I drafted an expository piece, modeling using these author’s craft moves. A strategy seen through this process is Joyce Armstrong Carroll’s (2002) Depth Charging. This simple yet powerful technique for connecting ideas and deepening meaning consists of underlining important words or phrases in a sentence, then saying more about these words in the next sentence. Words underlined below in my writing are examples of Depth Charging.

After using some prewriting strategies for generating a topic, I decided to write about why music is important to our lives. In beginning to draft, I focused first on Contrasts and Contradictions, the most universal of the signposts. Featured in both the fiction and nonfiction editions of *Notice & Note*, Contrasts and Contradictions keep our minds alert to what is surprising in our reading or what is different from what we know. I thought, “What might I say about the importance of music that is surprising to my readers or different from what they know?” I was influenced by the surprising quote from Adams (2005), “If have one operating philosophy about life it is this: ‘Be cool to the pizza delivery dude; it’s good luck.’” I drafted:

Figure 1. A contrast and contradiction chart.

What Contrasts and Contradictions did I notice?	Why did the author include this? How does this difference affect the reader?
<p>“If I have one operating philosophy about life it is this: ‘Be cool to the pizza delivery dude; it’s good luck.’”</p> <p>Sarah Adams, “Be Cool to the Pizza Delivery Dude”</p>	<p>We don’t usually think of being cool to the pizza guy as a guiding philosophy. This makes us think about the importance of simple kindness.</p>

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Yet, the specificity of key author’s craft moves of *Notice & Note* makes visible the composition process in a way that has the potential to transform students’ writing. Beers and Probst (2016) posit that reading nonfiction with a questioning stance offers a “vision of the world ... sharper, clearer, better than it was before we read” (p. 249). Their signposts provide a vision for both reading and writing that is sharper, clearer, and better as well.

Music is as important to life as eating, drinking, breathing, or sleeping. Music, like food and drink, fills our hunger and thirst for beauty and meaning. Music, like air, keeps us going when we have to work hard. Music, like sleep, offers a rest when times are tough.

I thought that my reader might not at first equate music with the vital necessities of life, just as Adams’ reader might not expect the connection with kindness to the pizza dude with philosophy, and this Contrast and Contradiction would provide emphasis.

Since we had noticed in our expository text that essays need both ideas and evidence, I drafted an example from my life to strengthen this idea.

I remember my old job as an assistant principal of a school. I was in charge of academics, meaning the teaching. The other assistant principal, Ms. King, had a baby and was gone for weeks, so I was responsible for both the teaching and the discipline. Every time a fight broke out, I had to stop what I was doing to help the students and try to get them to make peace. As I went to work every morning, I was so stressed out. I would play my favorite band, the Beatles, and for those few minutes in the car, I didn’t have to think of all that might go wrong during the day.

I then turned to Extreme or Absolute Language, which states:

When you’re reading and you notice the author uses language that leaves no doubt, exaggerates, or pushes to the limit you should stop and ask yourself,

“Why did the author say it like that?” (2016, p. 136).

The lines between the signposts often can be blurry, which is often the case when we try to define what is happening in writing. Already, my writing through the lens of Contrasts and Contradictions was pretty extreme. But thinking about Extreme or Absolute Language focused my mind on further strengthening my tone. I returned to my first paragraph and added intentionally extreme language.

Without music, your soul is like a starving man, slowly getting thinner and weaker, a drowning man, gasping for air, a man who hasn’t slept for days, slowly going crazy.

In expository and persuasive writing, Contrasts and Contradictions and Extreme or Absolute Language often form the core of the ideas, while Quoted Words and Numbers and Stats provide the details and evidence, informing our choices as writers.

I contemplated the signpost of Quoted Words:

When you’re reading and you notice the author quoted a voice of authority, a personal perspective, or cited others’ words, stop and ask yourself,

“Why did the author quote or cite this person?” (2016, p. 159).

Since my writing thus far had focused on how music can get one through tough times, it seemed natural to quote from lyrics of a relevant song.

Michael Stipe of R.E.M. sang, “When your day is long / And the night, the night is yours alone / When you’re sure you’ve had enough / Of this life, well hang on / Because everybody hurts.”

Still thinking through the lens of Quoted Words, I thought perhaps I might research and find quotes about how “Everybody Hurts” has helped people through dark times.

*Songfacts* notes, “The Nevada legislature commended R.E.M. for ‘encouraging the prevention of teen suicides,’ noting ‘Everybody Hurts’ as an example. Nevada has a high rate of teen suicide.” No one knows how many people songs like “Everybody Hurts” have saved.

I then examined Numbers and Stats, which states:

When you’re reading and you notice specific numbers, number words, or amounts, you should stop and ask yourself,

“Why did the author use these numbers or amounts?” (2016, p. 148).

I had left off in my writing wondering how many lives music has saved. Typing this question into Google, it became clear that this was probably truly an unknown number. But since my argument

asserted that the personal connection to music is transformative, I could research how many songs are downloaded each day.

*Techcrunch* states that over seven million songs are downloaded from iTunes each day. Each one of those seven million songs means something to the person who downloaded it. Each song could offer deep meaning or save a life.

Since the text set featuring many examples of *This I Believe* essays provided ample models of thesis statements, I thought about stating what I believe about music and then adding a “because.”

I believe music is what keeps us alive because it speaks to our soul when life is dark. Right now there is a teenager alone in her room, going through horrible pain, listening to music through her headphones. The music she loves is as important as anything else in her life this moment. When your life is at its low point, it is music that can lift you up.

By exploring Contrasts and Contradictions, Extreme or Absolute Language, Quoted Words, and Numbers and Stats, this piece emerged.

### **Music Keeps Us Alive by Stephen Winton**

Music is as important to life as eating, drinking, breathing, or sleeping. Music, like food and drink, fills our hunger and thirst for beauty and meaning. Music, like air, keeps us going when we have to work hard. Music, like sleep, offers a rest when times are tough. Without music, your soul is like a starving man, slowly getting thinner and weaker, a drowning man, gasping for air, a man who hasn't slept for days, slowly going crazy.

Of course, a starving man would rather have food than a song. But as food keeps our bodies alive, music keeps our hopes alive.

Everybody has a moment where music helped them through dark times. I remember my old job as an assistant principal of a school. I was in charge of academics, meaning the teaching. The other assistant principal, Ms. King, had a baby and was gone for weeks, so I was responsible for both the teaching and the discipline. Every time a fight broke out, I had to stop what I was doing to help the students and try to get them to make peace. As I went to work every morning, I fought to turn the car around and jump back into bed. I would play my favorite band, the Beatles, and for those few minutes in the car, I didn't have to think of all that might go wrong during the day.

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I “live wrote” these expository writing lesson plans, drafting the music piece as I went, attempting to make visible the internal process of writing. It is important to share the messiness of the writing process with students, such as the dead-end Google searches as well as the points of flow.

Of course, exploring writing through the lens of *Notice & Note* does not accomplish everything. I modeled adding a concession after the first paragraph, as I thought I needed to address objections in the minds of those who have actually been deprived of life's necessities. I explored revising for “show, don't tell” by changing, “As I drove to work each morning, I was so stressed out” to “As I went to work every morning, I fought to turn the car around and jump back into bed.” Nevertheless, the core of the essay was formed by thinking of possible writing moves through the signposts.

In making the reading and writing connection using *Notice & Note*, one might fully explore the signposts in a genre-based text set in a phase O'Flahavan would call *consume* or Wood Ray would call *immersion*, before progressing to writing. Alternatively, one might directly shift from exploring one signpost in reading to trying it in writing, then repeating with another signpost. The former approach has the advantage of deep immersion in both the genre and the signposts, while the latter offers immediacy and variety in the move back and forth from reading to writing.

Just as reading through the lens of *Notice & Note* focus shifts the thinking from “What was this text about?” to analyzing author's craft, writing through *Notice & Note* moves the thinking from “I need to write about this topic” to “What choices can I make as a writer?” Indeed, not all of the signposts are found in every text, and it is the job of a writer to think, “Does adding Extreme or Absolute Language strengthen my writing and work for my audience?” Writing through *Notice & Note* should not become a formulaic replacement of the five paragraph essay, a worksheet students are expected to dutifully fill, but rather serve as a way of thinking about possibilities as a writer.

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