Greetings everyone! This is Kurtis Clements with another effective writing podcast. In this episode, I am going to discuss strategies to make your writing shine. What do I mean by “shine”? Let me explain by telling you a little story.

Before my only daughter became a surly teenager, she used to love the nursery rhyme:

Star light, star bright, first star I see tonight; I wish I may, I wish I might, have the wish I make tonight.

My daughter would stand in our backyard and stare up at the sky, looking for the first star of the night. When she saw it, she’d earnestly repeat the nursery rhyme, her fingers crossed. With the last word, she’d close her eyes, make a wish, and I imagine hope it would come true.

Sometimes it did, but usually it didn’t.

As my daughter got older, she stopped reciting the nursery rhyme, probably because she realized the fleeting nature of dreams—that is, that wishing alone would not make things happen, but hard work just might.

In my experience, many students seem to think that writing a good essay is an impossible dream, a far-distant object requiring hope, like wishing on a star. But writing well doesn’t have to be just a wish, though it will require some hard work and patience. One strategy you can employ to help make your writing a success is to use what Karin Russell (2010) called a “rhetorical star” (p. 5).

Simply put, rhetoric is the manner in which an individual uses language to convey meaning to an audience. A rhetorical star, then, is a visual representation of what to think about as you approach a writing situation. The idea here is that one needs to think about the various aspects of a composition before barreling forward with the writing. Imagine each of the five points of a star as one of these concepts: subject, audience, purpose, strategy, design.

What follows are the important questions to ask yourself before you write, while you write, and after you have written:

**First important question: What is my subject?**

In this regard, think small and try to get as focused as possible as quickly as possible. Instead of writing about the big topic of recycling, for example, write about the focused topic of recycling some one thing—say, computer printer cartridges or paper in the office. Learn everything you can about the topic, so you can select the details and information you wish to include and that you think will help you get across your idea as clearly as possible.

**Second important question to ask: Who is my audience?**
No effective writer will answer this question, “Everyone.” “Everyone” is hard to imagine or describe. A large general-interest audience is rarely the audience. Instead, imagine a specific audience (other than your professor). If you are writing a research paper about childhood obesity, for example, you might imagine the readers to be school boards and dieticians whose cafeteria menus affect children’s health directly. The better you can imagine a specific group of people whom you are writing to or for, the better position you are going to be in to shape your writing appropriately.

Third important question to ask: What is my purpose?
Are you writing to explain digestion for other students of human anatomy and physiology? Are you writing to explain it to a patient with a particular ailment affecting his digestion? Are you writing to help a child understand why slow chewing is important? Every writer and every composition have a purpose, so it’s important to keep that in mind every step of the writing process. Focus on your reason for writing.

Fourth important question to ask: What strategy will I use in the composition?
Will you compose a narrative that is a story of some kind? Perhaps you are writing a personal narrative to illustrate a concept such as determination. Will you write a letter to the editor arguing for passage of a particular piece of legislation? Perhaps you’ve been asked to explain how to set up an in-home computer network. Maybe you’ve been tasked to describe a heart-healthy diet for an overweight patient. In each case, consider what strategy will work best for your composition – narration, persuasion, exposition of information, description, step-by-step process, and the like. Learn about and use that strategy or strategies in your composition to help you communicate your ideas as best as possible.

The final important question to ask: How should I design the document?
Every composition – a love note, a greeting card, a patient chart, a legal brief, a memo, an APA research paper – has a format or designed appearance that helps the reader focus on content and purpose. Learn the parts of the format you’re writing. Should there be bullet points? Will there be pictures or other images? Should the text be double spaced? These and other questions are answered based on the form you write, so be sure to give thought to the appropriate visual design of your document.

Next time your professor or employer assigns a writing assignment, don’t just wish on a star and hope it goes well. Instead, make your work shine by using the rhetorical star: consider your subject, audience, purpose, strategy, and design.

Thanks everyone, happy writing!

Reference