

What is Good Writing?

Kyle Taylor

The novelist Kurt Vonnegut once wrote that if a writer wished to write with style, the first thing he or she had to do was find a subject the writer cared about.¹ Of course, if one wishes to learn how to write with style, he or she should seek out Vonnegut's essay and read his advice directly. The reality is that good writing comes in many different forms and from many different sources, and none of it necessarily has to have the writer's care or concern at its heart. What really makes for good writing is a willingness to place the reader's interests above the writer's own interests. If one sits down to write an essay, it may become a good essay if the writer really cares about his or her material. The reason it will be good is that the writer thinks that it is good. However, how can that writer be sure that his or her writing is, in fact, good writing? One can only tell once he or she places that writing in front of an audience.

I constantly tell my students that the two most important concerns for a writer are purpose and audience. Determining purpose is as simple as answering the following question: "Why am I writing this?" As college students, your answer is often "for a grade." There is nothing wrong with that purpose in the classroom, but does that purpose still work when you start to consider submitting the work to *VOICES Magazine*? Here is where the second consideration, audience, makes an impact. Who was the audience when you were writing for a grade? Hopefully, you were writing to an informed peer group. If so, then your work may more easily translate from the classroom-centered purpose to a wider readership. Once your writing leaves the realm of the classroom, your audience expands exponentially. Now your readers are not only your fellow students, but now you are writing to staff, faculty, family, friends, strangers, passersby, and anyone else who happens to pick up a copy of the magazine or reads it online. This transition sometimes requires significant revision of the classroom work to prepare it for a more diverse audience.

So, what makes good writing? Consider your ingredients list: clear purpose, identified audience, sound grammar and mechanics, orderly organization, unified ideas, imaginative ideas, and sharp images. In short, good writing is all about details. Pay attention to all of the details, and good writing will be the result.

¹ Vonnegut, Kurt. "How to Write with Style." *How to Use the Power of the Printed Word*. Ed. Billings S. Fuess, Jr. Anchor Press: Garden City, NY, 1985. 33-38. Print.