

## Book Reviews

*Writing Rhetorically: Fostering Responsive Thinkers and Communicators*, by Jennifer Fletcher. Stenhouse Publishers, 2021. 292 pp.

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Jennifer Fletcher's *Writing Rhetorically* will be a welcome addition for writing teachers who want their students to think and critically analyze different writing situations rather than rely on more formulaic, one-size-fits-all approaches. In her text, Fletcher introduces teachers to a rhetorical approach to reading and writing, with the objective of teaching writing for transfer and for rhetorical thinking practices that can be adapted and applied to the different writing contexts students will face. A rhetorical approach, as Fletcher explains, "is a mindset that says, *here's a communication problem—now how do I solve that problem with the materials and resources I have on hand?*" (3; italics in original). Such an approach starts with "considerations of audience, context, purpose, and genre" and, as Fletcher highlights, is an inquiry process driven by questions and dialogue rather than formulas. The ultimate goal is "deep and transferable learning" (3).

This book is Fletcher's third highlighting rhetorical thinking, with her others including *Teaching Arguments* and *Teaching Literature Rhetorically*. I have used *Teaching Arguments* in a course aimed at future middle and high school English language arts teachers. Students often say they plan to hold on to Fletcher's book, given its accessibility in discussing argument, abundance of classroom-tested activities and planning tools, and significant value as a resource for teaching argument. They also appreciate Fletcher's helpful, teacherly ethos evident throughout the book. Current and future English language arts teachers will find Fletcher's latest book just as helpful a resource. Fletcher is an English professor at California State University Monterey Bay; she also is a former high school English teacher who has been a leader in California's Expository Reading and Writing Curriculum (ERWC). Designed by a task force of high school and California State University faculty, the ERWC provides a rhetoric-focused, college-preparatory English language arts course targeting high school seniors, with material for grades seven through eleven (*ERCW Online*). Fletcher's background allows her to introduce teachers to scholarly research related to rhetorical thinking and teaching for transfer. At the same time, Fletcher also understands what it means to be a high school English language arts teacher, how demanding that complex rhetorical situation can be. *Writing Rhetorically* is full of activities and planning handouts that can help teachers easily implement the theories and concepts that she introduces. The appendices, for example, include thirty-one pages of engaging planning tools, assignment examples, and activities that both teachers and their students will

appreciate. I have already earmarked several activities in the book that I plan to adapt for college writing students.

The book itself comprises eight chapters, not including the introduction and conclusion. *Writing Rhetorically* starts by presenting the fundamental concepts framing the book—rhetorical thinking and transfer of learning—with the remaining chapters focusing on different rhetorical writing skills needed for academic writing. In the introduction, “Understanding Writing as Communication and Problem Solving,” Fletcher discusses these concepts and explains the broader significance of such an approach. A primary objective is to help students “see themselves as independent writers who are capable of figuring out how to write well in new situations” (xx). The aim is to empower students to analyze the different rhetorical situations they will face in school and life. Chapters 1 and 3 elucidate rhetorical concepts including discussion of argument as inquiry, the rhetorical situation, exigence, stasis theory, and kairos as an interventional strategy. Fletcher also provides practical activities to implement these concepts in the classroom. In addition, she situates the broader significance of such an approach, drawing on statements by the National Council of Teachers of English, the Common Core State Standards, and the *Framework for Success in Postsecondary Writing*, developed by the Council of Writing Program Administrators, the National Council of Teachers of English, and the National Writing Project. Likewise, Fletcher synthesizes a range of sources in discussing a rhetorical approach, including classical rhetorical concepts, particularly those of Aristotle. The ideas of John Gage, James Crosswhite, Peter Elbow, John Bean, Edward P.J. Corbett and Rosa A. Eberly, and others are evident in these chapters.

In Chapter 2, “Teaching Writing for Transfer,” Fletcher explains the importance of procedural, conceptual, and conditional knowledge for the transfer of learning. Teaching for transfer demands “the kind of expansive framing that will help students see the big picture while they focus on challenging tasks in the present moment” (31). Fletcher contrasts expansive framing, which fosters the transfer of learning, with bounded framing, which “ties learning to a single task, test, or class” (31). After presenting these concepts and making a cogent argument for the benefits of expansive framing, Fletcher acknowledges the difficulties of gearing *all* instruction to expansive framing: “To be perfectly candid, I sometimes still use bounded framing with my students. I understand why teachers might feel like we need to remind students that something will be on a test or is worth 20 percent of their grade or whatever stick or carrot we grab when we feel students aren’t taking the work seriously” (35). This acknowledgment by Fletcher enhances her teacherly ethos because it demonstrates her awareness of the complex rhetorical situation teachers face. It further supports her argument that teachers need to consider conditional knowledge and flexibility, not formulas or prescriptivism.

However, sometimes the book does present its argument in a more black-and-white manner. For instance, after outlining some of the problems with prescriptivist approaches, Fletcher states, “I’ve learned to ask myself a tough question: Is my instructional approach aimed at helping my students to read or write better or helping me to grade more easily?” (6). While I appreciate the author’s fervency, the either/or logic takes away from the flexibility and contingent thought advocated throughout the book. However, more typically, as we have seen, Fletcher acknowledges the complexity of the teacher’s rhetorical situation, which has become even more multifaceted with the ongoing pandemic.

The remaining chapters discuss different aspects of rhetorical thinking applied to academic writing, including “Negotiating Different Voices and Perspectives,” “Designing and Conducting Research,” “Reasoning from Evidence,” “Making Choices about Genre and Structure,” and “Revising Rhetorically.” I appreciate her discussion of quotation, paraphrase, and summary, as well as strategies for teaching paraphrase and synthesis in “Negotiating Different Voices and Perspectives. Fletcher’s use of a unit on “nerd identity” is beneficial in understanding how to teach these concepts. I also appreciate Fletcher’s discussion of the need for “empathic communication skills” (114) and strategies for “promoting dialogue across difference” (64). Given our current highly polemical context, teaching students such skills is crucial to “respectfully negotiate diverse voices” and become responsible and productive citizens (114).

Overall, Fletcher’s book provides an excellent resource for writing rhetorically. This text will benefit new and veteran English language arts teachers who want to learn more about a rhetorical approach and teaching for transfer. Fletcher’s book is also well suited for teachers of future high school teachers, given its framing within the Common Core State Standards and the way Fletcher takes the reader through her own experience as a teacher engaging the ideas presented in her book. In addition, *Writing Rhetorically* will be helpful for college-level teachers who want to gain a greater understanding of the high school English language arts curriculum or who might want to adapt some of Fletcher’s classroom-tested activities for college students.

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## Works Cited

- Council of Writing Program Administrators (CWPA), National Council of Teachers of English (NCTE), and National Writing Project (NWP). *Framework for Success in Postsecondary Writing*. CWPA, NCTE, NWP, 2011.
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