

What Do New Writing Teachers Need to Know? A Review of *Teaching Mindful Writers*

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Jackson, Brian. *Teaching Mindful Writers*. Utah State UP, 2020. 281 pages.

In *Teaching Mindful Writers*, Brian Jackson argues that effective writers are mindful writers. As a central focus of the book, Jackson models how to design learning experiences that integrate metacognition and mindfulness into first-year writing instruction. He defines mindfulness as “a purposeful, deliberate awareness of what we are doing and how we could do it better—right now, and in the future” (35). To build purposeful and deliberate awareness, Jackson proposes a four-part learning cycle to teach mindful writing: planning, practicing, revising, and reflecting. The book provides strategies and practices for new teachers to design assignments for mindfulness using the learning cycle. For WPAs, *Teaching Mindful Writers* is a helpful resource to support new writing teachers and strengthen metacognitive writing instruction more generally. Jackson’s book is a suitable answer to what new writing teachers need to know. He concisely outlines complex theories and histories of writing studies while giving concrete examples for how to cultivate mindful writing and teaching habits. Jackson’s book is a beneficial addition to mindful teacher development.

With a focus on mindfulness as a form of metacognition, Jackson scaffolds how to teach metacognition into six segments. In the book’s opening and closing segments, “Designing Tasks for Mindful Writers” and “The Mindful Teacher,” Jackson delivers important theoretical, historical, and contemporary context for readers to consider what it means to teach writing and be a writing teacher. The middle four sections of the book move through each part of Jackson’s proposed mindful learning cycle. As a result, the book is organized for teachers and program administrators to engage the book repeatedly as students plan, practice, revise, and reflect. Each section and chapter offers quick entry points to find ideas, activities, and theories. This makes the book helpful for individual instructor needs, lesson planning, and larger pedagogy groups or workshops. At the beginning and end of each chapter, Jackson recaps key points and reminds readers of important takeaways. The teaching advice and templates are clear, flexible, and designed to give multiple options and opportunities for use. Teachers

can return to the text at any point to consult on strategies for a range of daily teaching tasks, such as setting goals, teaching reading, facilitating peer feedback, grading, discussing style, integrating reflection, and more.

The teacher development angle of the book offers an introduction and overview of writing theory. The beginning of the book positions rhetoric and writing as key metatheories for teaching first-year writing. Jackson argues that the content of first-year writing is writing, which is based in teaching-for-transfer (Yancey, Robertson, and Taczak) and writing-about-writing (Wardle & Downs) pedagogical approaches. This is complicated terrain and Jackson offers a way in for those just starting out in the field. Because his audience is new instructors, his synthesis of a broad field is necessarily brief and compelling. He points to other representative composition textbooks for readers to engage for supplementary support, such as Glenn and Goldthwaite's *The St. Martin's Guide to Teaching Writing*. Jackson's focus is teaching mindful writing, and he turns to heavy hitters of the handbook tradition in writing studies to support his goals. Jackson does not cite more recent developments in antiracist pedagogy, accessible writing pedagogy, and decolonial pedagogy. As readers engage with *Teaching Mindful Writers*, there is an opportunity to pair the book with texts outside the traditional canon and critically address the (un)commonplaces of teaching writing.

At the core of *Teaching Mindful Writers* Jackson delivers a self-directed learning cycle with four phases: plan, practice, revise, and reflect. These phases are discussed across the book as Jackson articulates why mindful writing is so important. For "the rookie first-year writing teacher" who Jackson is writing for, the sequence is easy to follow and even easier to put into action (4). In part two, he positions "planning" as an essential part of any learning sequence, where students assess the writing task by analyzing genre, questioning the rhetorical situation, reviewing their prior experience, acknowledging their ability to perform the task, and anticipating the value of the task. After this assessment, he encourages students to set goals. The section is filled with templates and sample activities readers can easily pick up and use quickly in their next class or unit. In part three, readers are again prompted to take action as part of the second phase of the learning cycle, "practicing." Jackson describes practice as the rhetorical action teachers and students take to learn to write. The practice section provides advice for lesson planning, daily writing activities, teaching with models, class discussion, facilitating collaborative learning, and strategies for teaching reading. Readers can look forward to concrete examples with a range of options. The practical advice in this section makes it one that WPAs and

new teachers will continue to return to as they consider learning outcomes and how to meet them.

In the final two phases of the learning cycle, Jackson pushes and pulls against two classic arguments related to style and process. For rookie instructors, who come with their own assumptions about writing, Jackson outlines the pros and cons of language-based instruction during the “revision” phase. He covers the basics on how to read and respond to student writing, as well as how to facilitate peer review. Ultimately, Jackson argues for a return to language instruction by sequencing style into the writing process. He suggests orienting students to style by developing a shared language about language. Specifically, he turns to play, revision, and reflection as ways to scaffold style into their writing process and “habituate students to style and encourage mindfulness” (218). Just as Jackson rehashes the argument to teach style, he also views his book as a response to the process pedagogy tradition. In the “reflection” phase of the book, he argues that *Teaching Mindful Writers* intervenes in process pedagogy by focusing on metacognition at various stages throughout the writing process, instead of just the drafting and revision stages. The design of the book supports this argument, as he includes reflection in every phase of the learning cycle. Ironically, part five, which is dedicated to reflection, is the shortest in the book. It is also the section readers will most frequently return to, as Jackson provides “a semester’s worth of prompts for mindful writing” (231).

In the final moves of the book, Jackson turns his attention to mindful teaching. In true meta form, the conclusion highlights how to incorporate the habits and strategies from the book into a mindful teaching practice. He outlines five domains of good teaching for mindful teachers to engage. These include: (1) Taking on a learner’s mindset to engage culturally responsive pedagogy, (2) Staying up to date with teaching strategies and approaches, (3) Knowing the subject matter, or understanding theories of communication, language, learning, and writing, (4) Mastering the teacher’s role as a communicator, and (5) Engaging in reflection and collaboration. He spends the majority of this section on domain number one. Specifically, he advocates for a learning practice where teachers continuously attune to the cultural values reflected in writing curricula. While culturally responsive pedagogy is not a framework defined at the beginning of the book, Jackson offers a few rhetorically flexible options for readers to consider in their future work as mindful teachers. Once again Jackson suggests concrete practices, such as keeping a reflective teaching journal, writing a teaching philosophy, routinely returning to questions about what it means to be a mindful teacher, and participating in teaching communities.

For the new writing teachers reading Jackson's book, he shows readers how to be mindful academics. This is valuable for graduate students who are new to teaching and to scholarly writing. As a graduate student, I often try on different voices, styles, and approaches to writing. While reading, I learned the power of synthesis as Jackson brings together histories, theories, and critical concepts in writing studies with finesse and clarity. Additionally, graduate students often have a heavy reading load and will appreciate the way Jackson "nutshell[s] what is most important" (25). He breaks down difficult, nuanced, and oftentimes intangible topics like rhetoric, transfer, metacognition, and mindfulness into something approachable. He covers a wide range of important pedagogical information to fill in new writing teachers' knowledge about research on reading, transfer, peer review, assessment, and style. At every turn, he describes what he is doing, where the information is coming from, the relevant arguments, and why he forwards certain pedagogies, ideologies, and strategies for first-year writing. He is not hiding, but transparent about where he is coming from and where he wants to go.

Jackson's clarity and transparency is especially prominent in the boundaries he places around the book. He persuasively articulates the stakes of mindfulness in first-year writing: Writing is a social act, an iterative activity, and a task best performed mindfully. He is forceful about writing as a learning activity. The book is everything I love about writing studies. As someone in the middle of dissertation writing, I live by the mantra, "I am writing to learn." It is a mantra that keeps me writing. At the same time, the scope of *Teaching Mindful Writers* is everything I struggle with about our field. The book contributes to a canon of writing studies enmeshed in white, Western traditions. Jackson addresses his position within this tradition, but he does not necessarily push against it—this is outside his scope. He emphasizes that metacognition and writing are culturally situated and value-oriented, but the book also relies on discourses that perpetuate normative standards for "effective" or "good" writing and teaching. When we consider what new writing teachers need to know, we also have a responsibility to push outside of the Western canon. For instance, habits and the "habits of mind" construct norms for how thinking and writing happen, as well as standards that define writing and what methods are deemed effective (see Yergeau, *Authoring Autism*; Hitt, *Rhetorics of Overcoming*; Martinez, *Counterstory*; Inoue, *Antiracist Writing Assessment Ecologies*). In placing boundaries around the book, the citational practices miss recent research related to the cultural and value-laden intersections of writing and race, disability, gender, class, sexuality, and citizenship. For WPAs who assign or suggest this book to new teachers, the recommendation should be paired

with texts that disrupt norms and habits. As mentioned earlier, one pathway for this work would be exploring the trend of (un)commonplaces in writing studies.

With the book's scope in mind, Jackson puts forth a useful framework for mindfulness that readers can adapt to their own practice. This is possible because Jackson recognizes metacognition as "a universal practice with culturally specific operations and values" (39). He urges readers to make the book work for us. The practice of teaching mindful writers utilizes rhetorical flexibility, which helps us question how people learn to write and how we as teachers of writing can support that learning. As Jackson prompts me toward mindfulness, he returns me to what I love about writing as an iterative, social, and cultural activity. *Teaching Mindful Writers* encourages teachers to mold mindful writing into their teaching process through reflection and intention. The book is especially helpful for WPAs looking to give clay to teachers of first-year writing, especially those just starting out.

Throughout this review, I keep returning to the question, what do new writing teachers need to know? Jackson gives us a key ingredient: mindfulness. *Teaching Mindful Writers* is a text that is easy to follow and easy to return to for quick reference. The result is a useful pedagogical resource for writing teachers who are juggling many new ideas and practices. It is a book all WPAs should pass out to graduate students and new writing teachers. It is a book for new writing teachers to keep close by and at the top of their book stack.

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