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## CPL Podcast: Teaching and Assessing Writing K-12

**Host: Carly Boreland**

**With: Dr. Les Perelman**

### **INTRODUCTION:**

You are listening to the JPL Podcast from the Centre for Professional Learning. Here's your host, Carly Boreland.

### **Carly Boreland:**

Welcome to the JPL Podcast for the New South Wales Teachers Federation's, Centre for Professional Learning. I'm Carly Boreland, and I'm the editor of the JPL. Today I'm talking with Dr. Les Perelman from the United States about effective writing teaching and what classroom teachers can do right now to get better at teaching. Les, welcome.

### **Dr. Les Perelman:**

Thank you.

### **Carly Boreland:**

Les, you've been in Australia, and we've been learning a lot from you about teaching writing and especially about long form and essay writing. Can you tell us a little bit about yourself and how you've come to have these particular ideas that you want to share with Australian teachers today?

### **Dr. Les Perelman:**

Well, first of all, I want to say I really enjoy being in Australia. I consider it one of the sanest countries on Earth. But to get back to my own biography, in graduate school my PhD was in Medieval studies and I did a lot of work on classical and Medieval rhetoric. And at the end of that, I decided that that and also work I did in social linguistic theory actually worked more towards the teaching of writing, a lot of which I did as a graduate student. So, I then decided to get a postdoc, and I got a postdoc at USC and trained there both in composition and rhetorical theory - more linguistics. And very fortunately, I had two mentors who trained me in writing assessment and I discovered that I was actually very good at writing assessment. But today what I want to talk about is the whole idea of merging rhetoric and rhetorical theory and social linguistic theory in the teaching of writing. And part of it is if you think about what writing is, writing is a relatively recent technology.

If fire is about 100,000 years old or more, writing is about 4 or 5 thousand years old. It's a new technology. And it's very, very different than speech. No one learns their first language. They just acquire it. The brain is wired for infants to learn language. People have to learn to read and write. And also, the nature of the technology makes it very different. People have time to revise in writing. People don't really have time to revise in speaking like I am to you right now. But also, in writing, there's no audience there. When we speak to people, we can see quizzical looks on their faces. They can interject



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questions or oppositional statements. When we're writing to a reader, we have to posit an imaginal of that. So, to construct all of that is an important part of writing and a very high-level, I think, crucial part of any kind of effective writing. I think anybody listening to this podcast has read instructions on how to do something that was written for somebody way above their technical expertise. So consequently, I then got interested in other issues such as revision - how people revise - which is something that is very, very specific to writing. And then how do we measure improvement in writing? How do we measure growth in writing? And again, I had two wonderful mentors. They taught me a lot. They taught me, among other things, that good assessment aligns with good teaching.

### **Carly Boreland:**

Les, I like what you were saying about the challenge of having an audience and knowing it. And when you are describing that whole process of writing and how new it is I was thinking about my own students who I've taught in high school and they wouldn't realise that writings relatively new in the human experience. They would think their teachers and learning how to write have been around for millennia. But it's actually a challenge for students at lots of levels to learn how to write and then for their teachers to be able to help them to do that. What are some of the other challenges that students face? So being able to articulate and envisage an audience. What are some of the other challenges for students that teachers can be aware of?

### **Dr. Les Perelman:**

Organisation. In speaking, again, if you compare, people can always get feedback but in writing, it's not a circular process. It's a linear process. And it's only in one channel as opposed to speaking, which is existing on multi-channels of expressions - faces, hand gestures, all those things. And that really puts itself or emphasises itself in the issue of organisation of knowing where to put what. And again, I think to go back to the revision process that a friend Nancy Sommers did a lot of work in the 1970s comparing mature writers, professional writers, and novice student writers, and discovered that the main difference was what they did when revising. That a mature writer/expert writers, for them, revision was moving lots of text around, erasing lots of text, adding text, restructuring it. It was what the word revision actually means, re-seeing it. And for most student writers, revision they see basically as editing of just correcting sentence-level issues - spelling, punctuation. And editing is important, but editing should be the last part of it. And this gets into a lot of research that's been done in the United States on thinking of writing as a process. And again, in speech production and reception occurs simultaneously. In writing, it doesn't. And in writing the most effective writing usually consists of the process of pre-writing, thinking what you're going to say; inscription, writing that first draft; revision, which is then really re-seeing and restructuring that draft; and finally editing, which should be the last step - correcting spelling, punctuation, phrasing and vocabulary.

### **Carly Boreland:**

So, for students it's important for them to feel that they have the time and the space and the freedom to scratch whole paragraphs out or rearrange sections of their writing or start again?



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**Dr. Les Perelman:**

Absolutely. If you don't give them that space and time you're not giving them a chance to develop as mature writers.

**Carly Boreland:**

So, Les most of your teaching experience is with highly educated and fairly affluent, I suppose, students who have already made it through to university and college-level study.

**Dr. Les Perelman:**

At MIT, MIT is a wonderful place because it's a total meritocracy. Students can only get in and survive if they're very smart. At the same time, they're not being admitted primarily on language skills. They're being admitted on largely mathematical, scientific skills. And we've had a lot of students from a lot of different backgrounds and some of the most rewarding work I have done is working with those students.

**Carly Boreland:**

And so, then Les could you help us a bit with understanding why you think writing is so important. So why developing those writing skills, regardless of intellect, or technical proficiency in a particular subject or discipline, but why actually being able to write matters?

**Dr. Les Perelman:**

I think if you look at our society the people who rule, who have control, are the people who can write. And the other side of that is you can actually attribute some disasters to writing inability. In the 1970s, there was a major nuclear disaster in central Pennsylvania called Three Mile Island. The core became uncovered, and we almost had a nuclear meltdown, which meant that the radioactive core would just start getting so hot it would go into the Earth and cause radioactive gas to spread all over central Pennsylvania. It turned out that the company operating the plant knew about the problem and there was a memorandum that was sent to the manager two months before the accident. Except if you read the memorandum, it isn't until the second to the last sentence, buried in the last paragraph that there's this sentence that says something close to "references one and two suggest that current procedure will result in the uncovering of the core". And when the person who received the memorandum got it, he said he never ended up reading down that far because it looked like an ordinary memo of the kinds that he usually gets. There was no idea of the importance of putting at the head something that's important. And again, that's something in writing and if you're warning somebody you don't give a long history before you say, "Get out of the street that cars going to hit you."

**MUSICAL INTERLUDE/ANNOUNCEMENT:**

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**Carly Boreland:**

Well, you've taken us far from the classroom, but that's the point, isn't it? That what we're doing in the classroom has a big impact on students' lives and society. Could you help us with some of those things that are just best avoided? Because sometimes we spend a lot of time on the "what to do", but sometimes we forget to stop doing some things. So, could you maybe help us with some of the things that are common problems that teachers commonly do when they try to teach writing that maybe are best avoided?

**Dr. Les Perelman:**

Well, I think the most important thing is teachers should not be seen by their students as grammar police. That, in other words, writing should be an activity, a positive activity, where people are expressing themselves, making meaning, and gaining pleasure from that. And if it again is seen as something where they just produce things and get punished for it, when people get punished, negative feedback, as psychologists tell us is very destructive. It's not that we shouldn't use grammar or talk about grammar, but it should always be done in context and it should always be done in context of what the student is doing right.

**Carly Boreland:**

So, the kind of Grammar Olympics style activities that are out of context and not related to students writing [crosstalk]--?

**Dr. Les Perelman:**

All grammar should be taught in the context of a student's writing.

**Carly Boreland:**

And so first they've got to have something to say, something to make meaning of?

**Dr. Les Perelman:**

Right. And also, this is not true for students who are non-native speakers - English born language - but any student who is bilingual English or a true bilingual or a native speaker is already speaking grammatical English. The kinds of grammatical mistakes they're making are very specific to the written form of English.

**Carly Boreland:**

Right. So, for students who are learning English, we just have to stop and say, "In English, we do it like this." But for other students—

**Dr. Les Perelman:**

Learning English after the acquisition time that children learn English is a very different process that occurs very differently in the brain then it does for a young child. I think most of us have seen young



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children just soak up several languages very, very quickly. One of the things to avoid is to give students writing which is totally alienated from what they're interested in. If people write about things that they're interested in or become interested because of readings, they're going to write much better than if it becomes a mechanical exercise and I think that's really important. All of us have seen the very mechanistic five-paragraph essay. The five-paragraph essay is not a bad thing in the early years to sort of teach basic form but by even the fifth-year teachers should be weaning students away from the five-paragraph essay for a very important reason, which is, the world is not divided into three points that make up any assertion. The neatness of the five-paragraph essay really is in some ways seductive for teachers. It's seductive for students because it's a formula that makes it very easy to write a paper, but it really doesn't often times say very much.

**Carly Boreland:**

Well, it strikes me as being hugely limiting because you never get to develop an idea or develop an argument fully.

**Dr. Les Perelman:**

Right. And especially some ideas take more than one paragraph, I hope [laughter].

**Carly Boreland:**

That's really important. So, you're saying move students beyond the structure--?

**Dr. Les Perelman:**

Of the five-paragraph essay. And that actually brings us to testing because testing, especially bad tests, reductive tests, stress the five-paragraph essay, and they stress the five-paragraph essay for a very simple reason: economics. Markers can mark a five-paragraph essay very quickly. The problem is, is that it doesn't reflect any kind of writing that is done in the real world.

**Carly Boreland:**

And that we would value as a society. So, teachers should be really aware that something that's done outside of the classroom for a different purpose doesn't creep in to be influencing what we value in our own teaching?

**Dr. Les Perelman:**

And, of course, it has. And I think some of the best practices now are to try to give students real situations with real audiences. One of the tests that I most admire had a recent prompt, which said, "Write a letter to the school principal on an issue that you think should be changed at school."

**Carly Boreland:**

Right. So, it's deeply embedded in the school, and teachers can think those things up for themselves.



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**Dr. Les Perelman:**

Absolutely. And think about it, no student is going to not have something that they think should be changed. There's a real audience, their principal, whom they probably have some knowledge of. And then again, you're writing to someone in authority over you so that creates a certain kind of respectful stance that you should have.

**Carly Boreland:**

But also, a sense of empowerment. That even in a school the most powerful person in the institution, even they can still listen to reason, can still have arguments put to them?

**Dr. Les Perelman:**

In some ways, it's actually, I think, good for teachers to engage in writing with their students to show that it's a cooperative activity. Everybody does it. I've done that in university classes where I'll do the assignment if it's an in-class assignment with the students and let them critique me.

**Carly Boreland:**

Right. So, it's kind of taking that modelling to a next level because it's a real situation?

**Dr. Les Perelman:**

Right. And I think this gets into peer review, which I think is essential because in the real world no one ever sends out an important piece of writing without having somebody else look at it. We learn a lot from peer review. We learn what is good practice from other people, and we learn from critiques from other people how we can improve our own writing in ways that are often times very non-threatening and less threatening than a teacher.

**Carly Boreland:**

And with space to change your mind. It's not peer editing where there's a red pen scratching up your work. It's a different kind of relationship.

**Dr. Les Perelman:**

Absolutely. And often times peer reviewer says, "That's a good argument, but you really need more proof. You're not very convincing there. Give me more reasons for that."

**Carly Boreland:**

So, Les we've been talking about formative assessment basically the whole way through this writing process where the teacher's involved in preparing the student, knowing where they're at, noticing what they're doing, providing constructive feedback. We've done all of that, but we haven't talked specifically about the assessment of writing and what teachers in New South Wales public schools could keep doing, change, think about. Could you help us a little bit from an international perspective about what we're doing well and maybe what we might think about for the future?





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**Dr. Les Perelman:**

Well, I think a lot of things are done very well. I think Australia does some of the best test development in the world. Especially your Year 12 leaving examinations are some of the best I've ever seen. And the English as a foreign language tests, the IELTS, that was developed jointly between Australia and Cambridge University in the UK is by far the best EFL test out there. But there are some other tests that are much more reductive like, for example, the NAPLAN. But rather than talk about and critique that I'd like to talk about both formative and summative assessments in the classroom and how teachers can use those to train students to be their own researchers and graders. And the old SAT writing test in the United States, which students have 25 minutes to write an essay on some topic they never thought before about, such as "failure is necessary for success", the markers who were marking these essays had to mark a minimum of 20 essays an hour or 3 minutes per essay. And if they marked over 30 essays or 2 minutes per essay, they got a bonus. Yes! I mean, it's scary, isn't it?

**Carly Boreland:**

It's almost as scary as robots marking things. At least they're still humans, I suppose [laughter].

**Dr. Les Perelman:**

Well, but you see part of it is they were actually able to show a correlation because when you have people with very reductive rubric reading so quickly they're emulating robots. And then people can say, "Well, it has about the same degree of accuracy."

**Carly Boreland:**

But that's because what they're doing is almost unthinking.

**Dr. Les Perelman:**

Right. In fact, what you discover is the best predictor of score - about 60% of the variance in score - can be achieved just by counting the number of words. Length becomes the single best predictor. Some of the best writing tests, including writing tests in Australia, like one of the ones I really like is the Australia Capital Territory's Scaling Test, which is a questionless question where Year 12 students are given two or three pages of pictures, quotations, cartoons, and short little pieces of articles on a topic and then they're asked to write an essay of no more than 600 words, so length doesn't become a factor. And like what people have to do in university and in the world, they're given a lot of disparate information and they're told that the writing has to make sense of it.

**Carly Boreland:**

Well, so far Les we've talked about what good practice would look like. And I'm going to run you through some of the key points and then you can add anything else if you think there're more gaps to fill. So, we've said so far that when you're thinking about teaching writing for your class, and this can be from kindergarten all the way through to Year 12, you're thinking about the audience and getting the students to have a real audience that they are writing for. That the work is organised. So, there's



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particular structures and a plan in place. That there's opportunity for revision. So not editing, but actually reviewing the whole piece and making it better by changing it as you see fit. The writing is based on student interest and it comes from a place that means something to the student. That when we're looking at students writing, it's in the context of their work. So, it's not an artificial thing done for a mechanical type audience, but rather that it's in the moment of their own work. That we provide real situations to write about but also that we are real ourselves. So, the teacher does writing with the students and opens their writing up to critique. And lastly, that we would then also have some peer review where we share what we've done so far with somebody else in a safe way that means we can change our writing in a low stakes kind of situation.

### **Dr. Les Perelman:**

You've done an excellent job summing up except for one thing which is the important idea in the process of pre-writing or what classical rhetoricians would call invention. Think about when anyone who's listening to this has something important to write. Often times before they even start writing they'll be thinking about what to write. And there's various tools, some from classical rhetoric and others from other modern techniques. A very important technique was developed by Peter Elbow called freewriting, which is, you just start writing stream of consciousness about what you're going to write, and you just keep writing on a keyboard or with a pen. And what you'll find out is 90% of what you write is garbage [laughter], but there'll be pearls within there that you can pull out and those can be the start of a good paper.

### **Carly Boreland:**

And you've got a paper which the Journal of Professional Learning is going to publish about writing and assessment and the title of that is called 'Testing to The Teaching'. It's not problematic to be focused on testing or assessment in your classroom, it's just that they need to be aligned to each other.

### **Dr. Les Perelman:**

A good test fosters good teaching and learning, a bad test doesn't. So again, the test is actually testing what that persons going to be doing and there's a one-on-one alignment.

### **Carly Boreland:**

Les when we're talking about teaching writing in New South Wales schools it could be for History, for Geography, for English. It has an application for lots of different subject areas. Is that right?

### **Dr. Les Perelman:**

Absolutely. And in fact, my field and what I've been doing for the past 30 years is writing across the curriculum. If you look at almost any discipline, especially in the sciences, there are parts of scientific reports that are narrative. Usually, the methods section. There are parts of scientific reports that are informative, such as the literature review. And then there are parts of scientific reports that are argumentative, such as the discussion section.





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**Carly Boreland:**

And so, what we're talking about is in broad terms really and we would then be relying on our teachers who are listening to take that back to their particular context, apply their subject discipline knowledge to that and use the K to 12 syllabus as well.

**Dr. Les Perelman:**

And there's a whole issue of transfer. Of helping students learn how to transfer these abilities from one discipline to another.

**Carly Boreland:**

Now, talking about transfer, you've had some interesting experiences teaching in university level like we talked about already, highly intelligent students who come to MIT. But you mentioned you have to spend a lot of time getting rid of some of the things that they've transferred from their high school schooling?

**Dr. Les Perelman:**

Yes. Our students at MIT largely got there because they scored very high on a lot of tests that wanted five-paragraph essays. Many of them were excellent at writing five-paragraph essays. I used to have to train my staff and in my own classes to literally deprogram students from writing five-paragraph essays. To tell them, "There can be more than three-body paragraphs. You can have three or four paragraphs on one topic. It's OK." That all those things are essential, and I think that they really need to be started earlier than university. I think by the time students are in, especially year nine or even earlier, they should be being taught that organisation should be organic to the idea and that the idea and what is being said should mould the organisation, not organisation moulding the idea.

**Carly Boreland:**

And so, for teachers in their classrooms right now that might mean that they have to do some deprogramming of what was taught before. So, if you've got Year 3 you just need to be aware that maybe some of the things they came with from Year 2, they've got to change a little bit, and that that's OK. Not that you have to be critical of the teachers that have gone before but just open to changing some practice.

**Dr. Les Perelman:**

Right. I think a useful analogy is to think of the five-paragraph essay as training wheels for a bicycle. That there comes a time when you have to take the training wheels off.

**Carly Boreland:**

And on that point, we might finish our podcast. And certainly, teachers would be most welcome to read our next edition of the JPL. So that'll be Semester 2, 2018. And they can read more about effective



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writing, teaching, and assessment there as well. Les, is there anything else you wanted to let us know before we head off?

### **Dr. Les Perelman:**

I just want to thank the Teachers Federation. I want to thank you. Coming over here, working with people, has been an absolute delight. I mean, I already regard all of you as colleagues.

### **Carly Boreland:**

Thank you. And we're so appreciative to have our colleague here from the US. You've been listening to JPL Podcast for the New South Wales Teachers Federation Centre for Professional Learning. I'm Carly Boreland, and I'm the editor of the JPL. I've been speaking with Dr. Les Perelman from the United States about teaching writing and writing assessment. To find out more and to listen to further podcasts you can visit our website at [cpl.asn.au/podcasts](http://cpl.asn.au/podcasts).

### **CONCLUSION:**

The JPL Podcast is produced by the Centre for Professional Learning and the New South Wales Teacher's Federation. All opinions expressed in this podcast are those on the individual speakers and do not necessarily represent the views of their employer or associated organisations. The host was Carly Boreland; technical direction by Jason Nicholas.

*Dr. Les Perelman* is an internationally recognised expert in writing assessment and the application of technologies to assess writing. He has written opinion pieces for *The Boston Globe*, *The Washington Post*, and *The Los Angeles Times*. He has been quoted in *The New York Times*, *The New Yorker*, *The Chicago Tribune*, *The Boston Globe*, *The Los Angeles Times*, and other newspapers. Dr. Perelman has been interviewed on television by ABC, MSNBC, and NHK Japan Public Television and interviewed on radio by National Public Radio, various NPR local stations, the Canadian Broadcasting Corporation, and the Australian Broadcasting Corporation.

The President of the College Board has credited Dr. Perelman's research as a major factor in his decision to remove and replace the Writing Section of the SAT. Dr. Perelman is a well-known critic of Automated Essay Scoring. To demonstrate the inability of Robo-graders to differentiate writing from gibberish, he and three undergraduates developed the BABEL Generator, which produces verbose and pretentious nonsense that consistently receives high marks from AES machines.

Dr. Perelman received his B.A. in English Language and Literature from the University of California, Berkeley, and his M.A. and Ph.D. in English from the University of Massachusetts.

After a three-year postdoctoral fellowship in Rhetoric and Linguistics at the University of Southern California, Dr. Perelman moved to Tulane University where he served as an Assistant Professor of Rhetoric, Linguistics, and Writing; Director of First-Year Writing; Director of the Writing Center; and a Member of the Graduate Faculty.



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For the next twenty-five years Dr. Perelman was Director of Writing Across the Curriculum in Comparative Media Studies/Writing at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology and served as an Associate Dean in the Office of the Dean of Undergraduate Education. He was Project Director and co-Principal Investigator for a grant to MIT from the National Science Foundation to develop a model Communication-Intensive Undergraduate Program in Science and Engineering. He served as Principal Investigator for the development of the iMOAT Online Assessment Tool funded by the MIT/Microsoft iCampus Alliance.

Dr. Perelman has served as a member of the Executive Committee of the Conference on College Composition and Communication, the post-secondary organisation of the National Council of Teachers of English, and co-chaired the Committee on the Assessment of Writing. He is currently a member of the editorial board of *Assessing Writing*.

Dr. Perelman has been a consultant to over twenty colleges and universities on the assessment of writing, program evaluation, and writing-across-the-curriculum. Dr. Perelman has served as a consultant for writing program assessment and development for the Fund for the Improvement of Postsecondary Education of the U.S. Department of Education and for the Modern Language Association. In 2012–2013, he served as a consultant to Harvard College and as co-principal investigator in a major two-year study assessing the writing abilities of undergraduates at the college.

Dr. Perelman co-edited the volume *Writing Assessment in the 21st Century* and he is the primary author of the first web-based technical writing handbook, *The Mayfield Handbook of Technical and Scientific Writing*. He has published articles on writing assessment, technical communication, computers and writing, the history of rhetoric, sociolinguistic theory, and medieval literature, and he co-edited *The Middle English Letter of Alexander to Aristotle*.