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Babbage, Keen J. (2010). *Extreme Writing: Discovering the Writer in Every Student*. NY: Rowman and Littlefield Education.

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Keen J. Babbage's *Extreme Writing: Discovering the Writer in Every Student*, looks at writing in the extreme sense of thinking outside the typical classroom writing assignments in order to bring a real-life relevancy to writing and make students excited about writing. The fundamental base of extreme writing derives from knowing (a) how to connect what students need to learn to their own areas of expertise, (b) what works for one's own students, (c) that the reason for school is to cause learning, and (d) that students can love and hate writing at the same time. Babbage is able to draw on his experience as both a teacher and an administrator in order to relate these principles to all school staff. This book is recommended for teachers and principals searching for a way to make writing assignments more interesting to students by connecting the assignment to students' interests while maintaining the academic integrity of the assignment

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From the book's title, *Extreme Writing: Discovering the Writer in Every Student*, one may assume the author, Keen J. Babbage, might include such suggestions as taking a field trip to an extreme sporting event and having students write while upside down on a motorcycle. The *extreme* part of extreme writing, however, is not extreme in the physical sense of daredevil moves. It is extreme in the mental sense of thinking outside the typical classroom writing assignments in order to bring a real-life relevancy to writing and make students excited about writing. As Babbage explains in the introduction, the fundamental base of extreme writing derives from knowing (a) how to connect what students need to learn to their own areas of expertise, (b) what works for one's own students, (c) that the reason for school is to cause learning, and (d) that students can love and hate writing at the same time.

The introductory section outlines these extreme writing principles. The focus of the first four chapters is to emphasize why and how to develop writing assignments that are both academically valid and connected to students' real life interests and dilemmas. Essentially, these chapters provide the reason for why and how to incorporate extreme writing into the reader's classroom. While each chapter has a different title, they all expound upon the same concepts. These chapters discuss how writing in and of itself is not something that students dread—students dread writing assignments that are used as busywork. Students do love to write and teachers can tap into this love by creating assignments that work with student interests and real-life concerns. One of the best ways for teachers to incorporate student interests, suggests Babbage, is to get students involved in developing the writing assignments.

Because these four chapters discuss essentially the same insights about students and writing, they can seem a bit repetitive. What is unique to each of these chapters and the following chapters, though, are the short sections called “for teachers only: teaching insights” and “for principals only: administrative insights.” The teaching insights present classroom issues surrounding incorporating writing into the classroom and ask teachers to brainstorm solutions. The administrative insights focus on how principals can best work with their teachers and districts. Babbage is able to draw on his experience as both a

teacher and an administrator in order to make these sections relevant to their intended audiences. A third type of section contained within most chapters is the case studies. In these sections, Babbage provides a detailed description of a student's or a teacher's struggle with writing assignments and how the situation was resolved. The book also contains a plethora of examples of how to incorporate the principles of extreme writing into many subjects (e.g., history, science, math, English).

The fifth chapter offers suggestions on how to incorporate writing across the curriculum by instead focusing on how to incorporate writing *within* the curriculum. Babbage's concern with mandates to incorporate writing across the curriculum is that writing will become the teachers' and the students' enemy. Teachers are often told only that they need to include writing in their classes. They are not given any suggestions as to how to effectively incorporate writing within the existing curriculum. Such mandates result in writing assignments created simply to fulfill the requirement. Writing assignments created in this way are boring for the students to write and boring for the teachers to grade. Babbage offers insights into how to incorporate the extreme writing principles across grade levels and subjects in order to avoid those types of writing assignments.

Of course, there will be some students who will not enjoy writing no matter how relevant or interesting the assignment is made. The sixth chapter offers thoughtful insights from many experienced and knowledgeable teachers as to how to work with problems that may arise when adopting the extreme writing principles (problems which, essentially, are the problems that arise for many kinds of assignments). The remainder of the chapter is full of lists meant to spark the reader's involvement in problem-solving some issues that arise when using writing assignments to actually cause learning instead of to fill time or administrative requirements. The seventh chapter focuses on how to emphasize the importance of the revision process. Babbage includes examples of humorous replies to the common student concern, "But why does spelling count against me? You knew what word I meant" (p. 148). These examples are meant to provide a real-life connection to why spelling counts and while they may not have been meant to be humorous, some students (and

readers of this book) may append a light-hearted tone to these replies. Other revision concerns, such as punctuation and word choice, are discussed.

The eighth and final chapter focuses on how to make writing assignments liberating. Liberation can be attained by completing a writing assignment in order to graduate high school, or in order to create a new chapter for a history book and become an expert in that topic, or to use a writing assignment to get students involved in policy decisions at their school. The main example in this chapter is how a school decided to offer a failing high school senior the chance to graduate by writing a book. The first two chapters of that book are included. Following this chapter is an epilogue that contains Babbage's thoughts on the future of writing assignments in schools. He also offers a sort of short story on a town that decided to liberate itself of the printed word. This story emphasizes the importance of writing in everyday life.

Throughout each chapter, Babbage provides many examples of writing assignments and hypothetical conversations between students and faculty meant to further illustrate his points. By providing a large number of assignment and conversation examples, Babbage ensures that teachers who read this book will not be at a loss for what to do in their own classrooms. Some readers may find the examples too numerous or too long, in which case they may be skimmed. What could be improved in this book is Babbage's hypothetical conversations, which are a tad too long and, as such, become internally repetitive. The length of these conversations could have been shortened and still have provided the reader with an understanding of Babbage's purpose for including the conversation. For example, Babbage provides six paragraph-long examples of notes that students could have written to each other throughout the school day as an illustration of how students love to write. Certainly, teachers already know that students write each other notes and have seen many notes in their time teaching. As such, two or three short examples would have been sufficient to illustrate the point that students love to write through these social notes. These sometimes stilted conversations occasionally stretch on for two and a half pages and could easily have been shortened while still successfully illustrating Babbage's points.

On the other hand, Babbage's assignment and conversation examples are very useful because they are not confined to the English or Language Arts classroom. His examples cross subjects, teacher viewpoints, principle viewpoints, student viewpoints from inside and outside school, and multiple grade levels. By drawing on his experience as both a teacher and an administrator, he is able to relate this book to many members of the school staff.

Overall, this book is recommended for teachers and principals searching for a way to make writing assignments more interesting to students by connecting the assignment to students' interests while maintaining the academic integrity of the assignment. Babbage cautions the reader to not use his assignment examples exactly as they appear in the book because the composition of students is different among different classrooms. These examples are meant as a jumping off point and as a way to start the conversation with fellow faculty members as to how to make writing assignments more relevant to students' personal and academic lives. Teachers and principals looking for the answer to the question, "When will I use this writing assignment in real life?" are encouraged to read *Extreme Writing: Discovering the Writer in Every Student*.

About the Reviewer

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