

# Principal's Research Review

Supporting the Principal's Data-Informed Decisions

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## Learning to Write and Writing to Learn

By Nancy Protheroe

**T**he ability to write well is becoming increasingly important in today's world. In a study by the National Commission on Writing for America's Families, Schools, and Colleges (2004), employers indicated that:

writing is a "threshold skill" for both employment and promotion, particularly for salaried employees.... "In most cases, writing ability could be your ticket in...or it could be your ticket out," said one respondent. (p. 3)

Those employers also expressed concern that many new employees come to them needing training to prepare them to adequately address the expectations of the writing-related aspects of their jobs. The higher education community expresses similar

concerns, with college instructors estimating that as many as 50% of their students come unprepared for college-level writing (Achieve Inc., 2005).

On a positive note, results from the most recent National Assessment for Educational Progress pointed to some recent improvements in writing skills among 12th graders, with the percentage of students performing at or above the basic level increasing from 74% in 2002 to 82% in 2007. However, this included only about one in four at the proficient level. In addition, another one in five students performed below the basic level (Salahu-Din, Persky, & Miller, 2008).

It is clear that many of our students need increased opportunities to engage in writing. However, in many middle and high schools, writing is taught and practiced primarily in English and language arts classes. When it is

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### Just the Facts

- "Writing is a 'threshold skill' for both employment and promotion" (National Commission on Writing for America's Families, Schools, and Colleges, 2004, p. 3).
- "Writing is how students connect the dots in their knowledge" (National Commission on Writing in America's Schools and Colleges, 2003, p. 3).
- "Given the constraints imposed by high-stakes tests, writing as a way to study, learn, and go beyond—as a way to construct knowledge or generate new networks of understandings—is rare" (Applebee & Langer, 2011, p. 26).
- "For students, writing is a key means of asserting and defending claims, showing what they know about a subject, and conveying what they have experienced, imagined, thought, and felt" (National Governors Association Center for Best Practices & Council of Chief State School Officers, 2010, p. 63).

used in other content-area classes, it often provides opportunities for development of only low-level skills. Applebee and Langer (2011) discussed the findings from the four-year National Study of Writing Instruction:

Across subject areas, teachers voice an understanding of the ways in which writing can contribute to learning, see writing as a valuable tool for assessing students' understanding, and in many cases see unique and particular roles that writing could play within their own disciplines.

At the same time, the actual writing that goes on in typical classrooms across the United States remains dominated by tasks in which the teacher does all the composing, and students are left only to fill in missing information, whether copying directly from a teacher's presentation, completing worksheets and chapter summaries, replicating highly formulaic essay structures keyed to the high-stakes tests they will be taking, or writing the particular information the teacher is seeking. Given the constraints imposed by high-stakes tests, writing as a way to study, learn, and go beyond—as a way to construct knowledge or generate new networks of understandings—is rare. (p. 26)

Another part of the problem is the limited time provided for writing in content-area classes—another finding from the National Study of Writing Instruction (Applebee & Langer, 2011). This lack of attention to writing in other content-area courses makes sense from two perspectives. First, those teachers are focused on teaching the content-area-specific material on which their students will be assessed. Second, many of these teachers have

received little preservice preparation or professional development in either how to teach writing or how to use writing as a tool to teach other content. Graham (2008) and his colleagues interviewed teachers across the United States. They found that:

Many teachers told us that they were not adequately prepared to teach writing. Almost one half of them indicated that they had received minimal to no preparation to teach writing. This included the preparation they received at college, from their school district, and through their own efforts. Such preparation is extremely important, as we found that those who were better prepared were more likely to use writing practices with a proven record of success and to make needed instructional adjustments for struggling writers. (p. 1)

Graham (2008) also interviewed students and found that their descriptions of opportunities for writing paralleled those reported by teachers to Applebee and Langer (2011). It is clear that the types of writing experiences in which students participate pose a barrier to their ability to advance their writing skills:

*Concerns about the ability of students to write and the need to increase the emphasis on writing instruction are being addressed in the newly-developed Common Core State Standards.*

The most common writing activities that these students engaged in were writing short answer responses to homework, responding to material read, completing worksheets, summarizing material read, writing journal entries, and making lists. Together, these activities involved little extended analysis, interpretation, or writing. In fact, one half of the most common assignments were basically writing without composing (short answers, worksheets, and lists). (p. 1)

Concerns about the ability of students to write and the need to increase the emphasis on writing instruction are being addressed in the newly-developed Common Core State Standards (CCSS). In addition, the standards developed for writing make the link between writing and content areas explicit even in the name of the relevant section—Common Core State Standards for English Language Arts & *Literacy* in History/Socials Studies, Science, and Technical Studies (emphasis added). This link is also evident in specific grade-level standards. For example, students in ninth and tenth grades should be able to “write arguments focused on discipline-related content” and “write informative/explanatory texts, including the narration of historical events, scientific procedures/experiments, or technical processes” (National Governors Association Center for Best Practices & Council of Chief State School Officers, 2010, pp. 64–65).

The need for students to meet the CCSS presents both a challenge and an opportunity for middle level and high schools. Effectively meeting this challenge will require a schoolwide effort that engages teachers across the school in providing instruction focused on writing. On a positive note, research has identified a positive link between providing increased opportunities for writing in content-area classes and students’ mastery of the content. Specifically, “it enhances critical thinking; allows students to take greater responsibility for their own learning; promotes reflective thinking and questioning; and helps students make connections” (Urquhart and McIver, 2005, p. 3). Thus, increasing the focus on writing should not result in teachers taking needed time away from content-area instruction in math, science, or social studies.

There are two key aspects of instruction related to writing that schools will need to address: learning to write and writing to learn. There are several ways schools can improve writing instruction, and each way presents opportunities and challenges.

## Learning to Write

In Gallagher’s (2006) view, writing instruction in secondary school is often characterized by some specific problem areas. For example,

- Students do not write enough, and students who need more practice typically get fewer—and easier—opportunities for writing
- Insufficient explicit writing instruction may be provided
- The assignments often have little connection to students’ prior knowledge or interests
- Students are given insufficient tools and opportunities for assessing their own writing
- Feedback on writing may focus too heavily on the mechanics.

Urquhart and McIver (2005) discussed the need to provide effective feedback. They stressed that although it may be tempting to focus primarily on areas that need improvement, students also need to hear what they are doing well so that they can replicate it. The most effective feedback provides students with “explicit, specific, and thorough explanations linked directly to a written piece” (Urquhart & McIver, 2005, p. 62).

Graham and Perin (2007) conducted a meta-analysis of the available research on writing instruction and identified 11 key elements of writing instruction for the middle level and high school grades. In addition, they assigned an effect size—a measure of the potential impact of use of the approach on student learning. They concluded that the following elements are likely to provide strong support for student learning:

- Writing Strategies (Effect size [ES]=0.82): Teaching strategies for planning, revising, and editing compositions
- Summarization (ES=0.82): Explicitly teaching how to summarize text.
- Collaborative Writing (ES=0.75): Providing instructional opportunities for students to work together “to plan, draft, revise, and edit their compositions” (Graham & Perin, 2007, p. 16)

- Word Processing (ES=0.55 with a stronger effect size—0.70—for low-achieving writers): Providing tools to allow students to manipulate text more easily
- Sentence-Combining (ES=0.50): Teaching students to “construct more complex and sophisticated sentences through exercises in which two or more basic sentences are combined into a single sentence” (p. 18)
- Prewriting (ES=0.32): Providing opportunities to generate and organize ideas before writing a first draft
- Inquiry Activities (ES=0.32): “Engaging students in activities that help them develop ideas and content for a particular writing task by analyzing immediate, concrete data (comparing and contrasting cases or collecting and evaluating evidence)” (p. 19)
- Process Writing Approach (ES=0.32): Using “activities that emphasize extended opportunities for writing, writing for real audiences, self-reflection, personalized instruction and goals, and cycles of planning, translating, and reviewing” (p. 21)
- Study of Models (ES=0.25): Providing opportunities for students to analyze examples of different types of writing with emphasis on identifying key features
- Writing for Content Learning (ES=0.21): Graham and Perin characterized “the impact of writing activity on content learning [as] small [but] consistent enough to predict some enhancement in learning as a result of writing-to-learn activities” (p. 20).

The researchers also found that opportunities for teacher development can have a significant effect on a teacher’s ability to understand and implement the strategies effectively. For example, while the average effect size for the process writing approach was 0.32, a stronger effect size of 0.46 was observed for teachers who had been trained in use of the process,

with a “negligible” effect observed for teachers with no relevant training (Graham & Perin, 2007).

**Note:** Effect sizes report the average difference between a type of instruction and a comparison condition. They indicate the strength of the effect.

0.20 = small or mild [positive] effect

0.50 = medium or moderate effect

0.80 = large or strong effect (Graham & Perin 2007, p. 13)

## Writing to Learn

The National Commission on Writing in America’s Schools and Colleges (2003) suggests that the time provided for students to write across the curriculum should be increased. To many content-area teachers struggling with the need to cover an already jam-packed curriculum, this might seem unrealistic. But both research and practice support the notion that using writing as a tool in these classes can do double duty. It can provide opportunities for writing while simultaneously strengthening student understanding of the information and skills being taught.

According to the National Commission on Writing in America’s Schools and Colleges, “writing is how students connect the dots in their knowledge” (2003, p. 3). Graham and Perin (2007) agreed and expanded on how this can happen:

In the school setting, writing plays two distinct but complementary roles. First, it is a skill that draws on the use of strategies (such as planning, evaluating, and revising text) to accomplish a variety of goals, such as writing a report or expressing an opinion with the support of evidence. Second, writing is a means of extending and deepening students’ knowledge; it acts as a tool for learning subject matter...Because these roles are closely linked, *Reading Next* [a companion report] recommended that language arts teachers use content-area texts to teach reading and

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writing skills and that content-area teachers provide instruction and practice in discipline-specific reading and writing. (pp. 9–10)

Writing to learn deepens student understanding by extending students' thinking. Like reading to learn, it is a meaning-making process that encourages students to organize their thoughts by labeling, objectifying, modifying, and building on concepts (Jacobs, 2002). Sorenson (1991) writes:

Proponents of writing across the curriculum are quick to clarify that writing to learn is not the same as learning to write; but as flip sides of a single coin, the two support one another.... When content area teachers incorporate writing in all areas of the curriculum—social studies, math, science, vocational education, business, foreign language, music, art, physical education, and language arts—students benefit in three ways: they have a resource for better understanding content; they practice a technique which aids retention; and they begin to write better. (para. 1)

Research-based support for writing as a support for learning was provided by a study of schools termed the 90-90-90 schools—90% of students were low income, 90% were from ethnic minorities, and more than 90% of the students met or exceeded high academic standards. Although only elementary schools were studied, the lessons learned about the positive effect on learning through increased writing opportunities also has implications for secondary schools:

By far, the most common characteristic of the “90/90/90 Schools” was their emphasis on requiring written responses in performance assessments.... The use of written re-

sponses appears to help teachers obtain better diagnostic information about students, and certainly helps students demonstrate the thinking process that they employed to find a correct (or even an incorrect) response to an academic challenge.... The benefits of such an emphasis on writing appear to be two-fold. First, students process information in a much clearer way when they are required to write an answer. They “write

to think” and, thus, gain the opportunity to clarify their own thought processes. Second, teachers have the opportunity to gain rich and complex diagnostic information about why students respond to an academic challenge the way that they do. (Reeves, 2004, p. 190)

Although making time for content-area writing instruction initially may not seem like an easy task, planning ahead to integrate such instruction into the curriculum can make content-area writing instruction possible, effective, and efficient, rather than just an add-on. The key thought for a teacher to keep in mind should be, How can I use writing as a tool to support content-area learning?

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“For students, writing is a key means of asserting and defending claims, showing what they know about a subject, and conveying what they have experienced, imagined, thought, and felt.... To meet these goals, students must devote significant time and effort to writing, producing numerous pieces over short and long time frames throughout the year.” (National Governors Association Center for Best Practices & Council of Chief State School Officers, 2010, p. 63)

“Writing is not simply a way for students to demonstrate what they know. It is a way to help them understand what they know. At its best, writing is learning.” (The National Commission on Writing in America’s Schools and Colleges, 2003, p. 13)

## What Writing-to-Learn Activities Might Look Like

There are many simple writing activities that content-area teachers can incorporate into daily instruction. These include asking students to “explain a concept; write a word problem; compare and contrast two concepts; write a caption for an illustration; give examples or make lists; describe or define; reflect; justify a solution; or write a review, critique, or summary” (Irvin, Meltzer, & Dukes, 2007, p. 69).

Fisher and Frey (2008) suggested that writing-to-learn strategies should take into account the different purpose for writing when it is used this way. In their view, writing to learn

differs from other types of writing because it is not a process piece that will go through multiple refinements toward an intended final product. Instead, it is meant to be a catalyst for further learning—an opportunity for students to recall, clarify, and question what they know and what they still wonder about. (p. 170)

The “quick write” is a writing-to-learn strategy. By using quick writes, teachers can ensure that students write frequently without devoting too much class time to the activity (Brozo & Simpson, 2007). They can take as little as one or two minutes of class time. Quick writes are simply “low-stakes assignments completed during class that can stimulate discussion or encourage passive students to reflect

and think about a content-area concept” (Brozo & Simpson, 2007, p. 219). Teachers might have students write at the beginning of class to help them focus on a topic or at the end of class to highlight what they learned (Fisher, Frey, & Williams, 2002).

There are other writing exercises that support content-area learning. For example, Klingner and Vaughn (1998) described a strategy called “getting the gist”:

The goal of getting the gist is to teach students to restate in their own words the most important point as a way of making sure they have understood what they have read. This strategy can improve students’ understanding and memory of what they have learned. (p. 34)

## Summing Up

As students move through the grades, demands for reading and writing increase. To ensure understanding, students should be asked to respond to this more-complex reading material—and to produce their own analysis of the content, evaluate its argument or position, and formulate their own position statements on the topic. Students will need to know how to outline and how to organize their ideas in a coherent and persuasive manner.

The National Commission on Writing in America’s Schools and Colleges (2003) summed it up:

If students are to make knowledge their own, they must struggle with the details, wrestle with the facts, and rework raw information and dimly understood concepts into language they can communicate to someone else. In short, if students are to learn, they must write. (p. 9) [PRR](#)

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