EDUCATION WEEK
2019
SPOTLIGHT

—Illustration by James Steinberg

WRITING INSTRUCTION

EDITOR'S NOTE

An essential skill in the classroom, educators are working to make writing more meaningful for both school and the workplace. In this Spotlight, learn how the Common Core affected reading and writing, how teachers are reimagining the revision process, and how to foster a love of writing.

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Published July 19, 2018, in Education Week's Curriculum Matters Blog

The State of Common-Core Reading and Writing in 5 Charts

By Stephen Sawchuk

Eight years later, have the Common Core State Standards led to a revolution in how reading and writing are taught?

Not exactly. Teachers have shifted practices dramatically on vocabulary and assigning nonfiction, but they've struggled with some of the other shifts in those standards—most notably the tenet of having students of all reading abilities grapple with grade-level texts.

That's according to a new, nationally representative survey of some 1,200 teachers published today by the Thomas B. Fordham Institute. The teachers fall into three categories: those teaching grades 4- 6, 6-8, and 9-10. The survey's margin of error is plus or minus 5 percentage points.

The usual survey caveats apply, of course: These are self-reported practices, not observed practices, which means that we can't know for sure how teachers interpreted the questions. And it can be hard to capture detailed information about really nuanced aspects of teaching in a survey.

Let's dig in!

Vocabulary Is Now Largely Taught in Context

Most teachers now teach new words in the context of reading and conversation. This is encouraging, Fordham analysts write, since most ELA scholars agree that learning words in the context of rich texts is superior to memorizing a list each week and taking a quiz on it.

Of note, 53 percent of teachers reported teaching domain-specific vocabulary essential to each discipline (sometimes called by practitioners "Tier III" words); fewer taught general academic vocabulary (or "Tier II" words).

Literacy experts greeted this finding with open arms.

"The news on vocabulary is heartening, moving away from list-based and program-based approaches," said Carol Jago, a former president of the National Council of Teachers of English and now a consultant, who was not involved in the survey. "I think all of that was eating up too much classroom time."

Teachers Continue to Choose Reading-Level, Not Grade-Level Texts

Here's an instance in which there's evidence of some backsliding. Compared to Fordham's last big survey on common-core reading, in 2012, the proportion of teachers reporting using "grade level" texts rather than texts based on students' reading levels has fallen among secondary teachers.

This wades right into one of the common core's biggest controversies. The standards prioritized giving even struggling readers opportunities to learn grade-level texts. It challenged what had long been an orthodoxy in reading instruction, especially for lower-level readers: choosing "just right" texts for each student that won't cause frustration. The problem with that, the thinking goes, is that some kids are never challenged enough to reach the difficulty or complexity of grade-level reading materials, and thus fall further behind.

Fordham found that far fewer secondary teachers are assigning grade-level reading materials, and among teachers overall, fewer than half are assigning those texts.

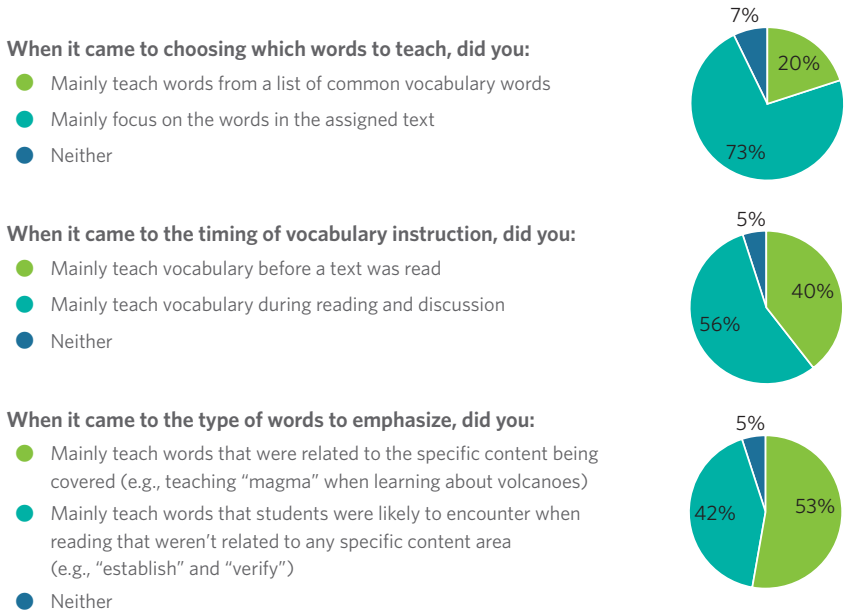
Timothy Shanahan, an emeritus professor at the University of Illinois at Chicago, pulled no punches in interpreting the results: "It means holding kids back and not learning texts that are hard enough," he said.

(Shanahan provided feedback on an early draft of the survey report, and also helped to write portions of the common core.)

One explanation for this finding may also be that teachers haven't been given enough training on how to "scaffold" more complex readings for students who are furthest behind.

"Asking teachers to teach kids who are well below grade level these texts is an extremely big ask, even for experienced and skilled teachers," said David Griffith, a senior research and policy associate at Fordham who co-wrote the report accompanying the survey findings. "When I look at this, as a former teacher who is now interested in policy, that's the one where I think, 'Wow, teachers really have to have their act together and be supported to do this well.' I see it as a basic capacity issue."

FIGURE 9: Which best describes your approach to teaching vocabulary last school year?



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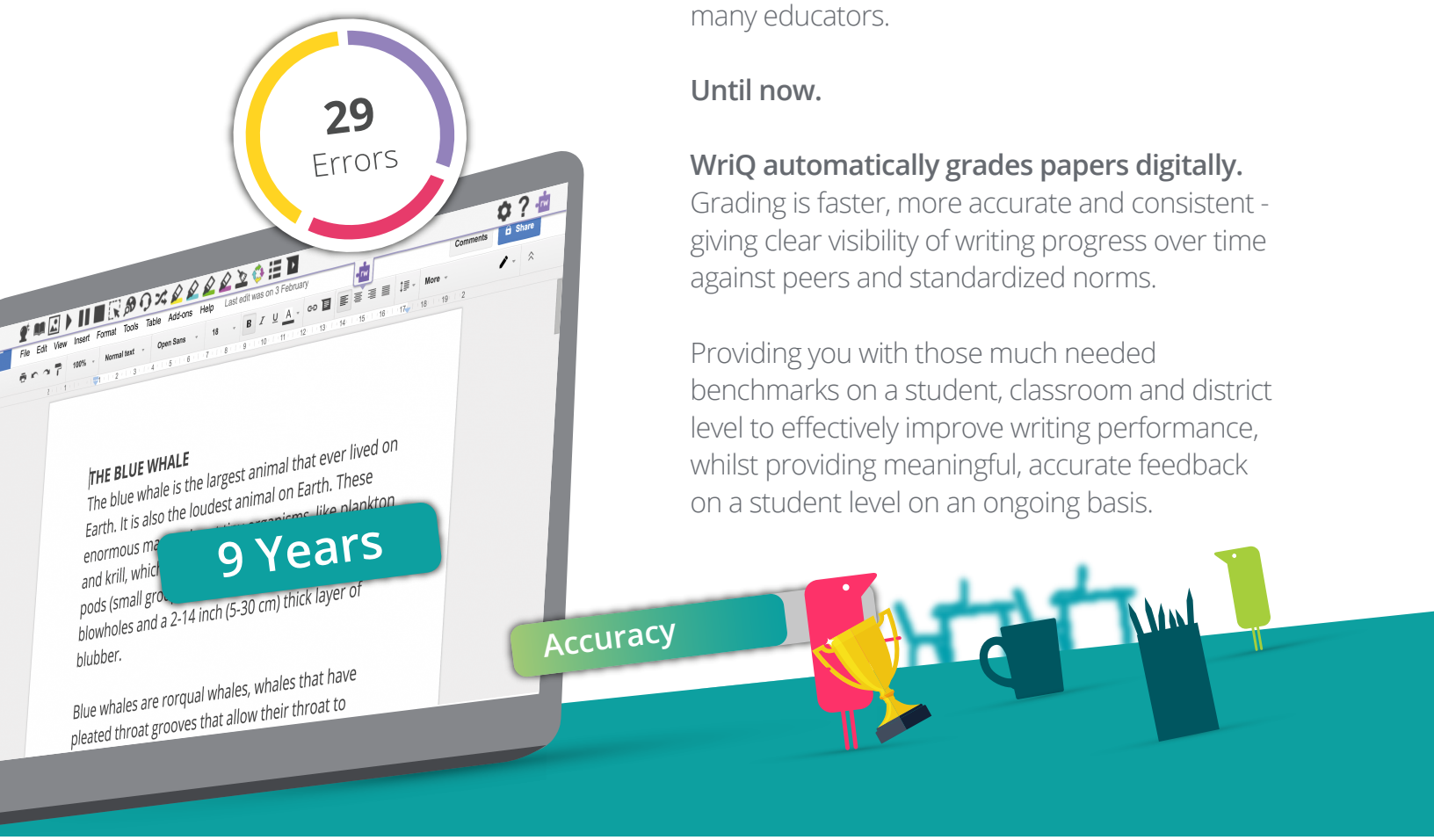

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Most readers know that the common core highlighted the importance of reading and writing based on texts, not just on personal experience or creative writing—by far the most dominant kind in U.S. schools through the 2000s.

Evidence-Based Reading Is Common, But Writing Lags

On the reading front, teachers are overwhelmingly asking students to cite evidence from texts when they teach "close reading," which basically means assisting students as they grapple with a text's craft, structure, and meaning. More than 90 percent of respondents said they did that.

No other techniques used as part of close reading scored as high, which Jago said probably reflects that some other best practices weren't offered as drop-down choices on the survey.

"The idea of evidence-based questions, text-based questions is an easy idea to get your head around. Other techniques are harder to improve in instructional materials, and I do think there are a whole lot of things that high-quality close reading would have that aren't described here," she said. For example, teachers must make sure students feel safe offering up opposing points of view, that they are intrepid in their interpretations, and that all students have a chance to speak up, she noted.

On the other hand, writing still tends to be based on personal experience or creating a narrative, rather than based on texts. This was yet another flash point in the common-core wars, since personal experience was long a component of "workshop" -type writing classrooms.

What's potentially most problematic here, literacy experts said, is that teachers reported giving below grade-level kids tasks based on knowledge or experience, not asking them to grapple with a text, as they did for more skilled students. In other words, students who are presumably more academically advantaged are getting what appears to be more challenging work.

Fiction Is on the Decline

Arguably, the single most divisive issue in the English section of the common core was its emphasis on giving students access to challenging nonfiction text as part of the effort to build their background knowledge and their academic vocabularies.

FIGURE 4: When it comes to choosing reading materials, are you more likely to choose texts:

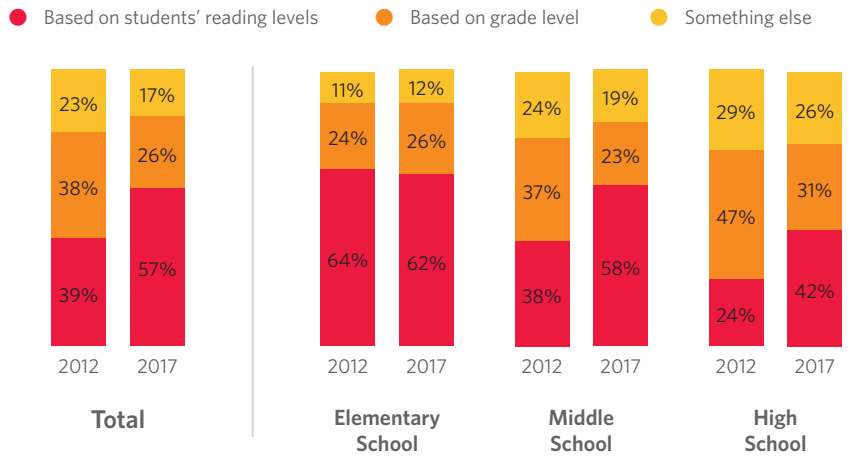


FIGURE 12: Which of the following would you say are must-haves in a high-quality "close reading lesson? (Check all that apply.)

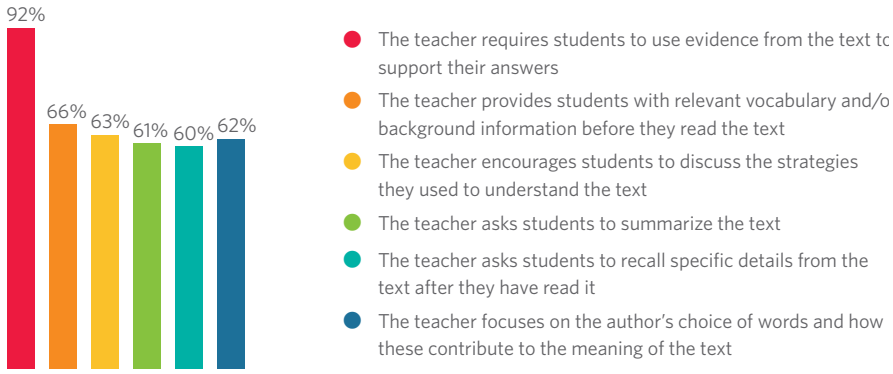
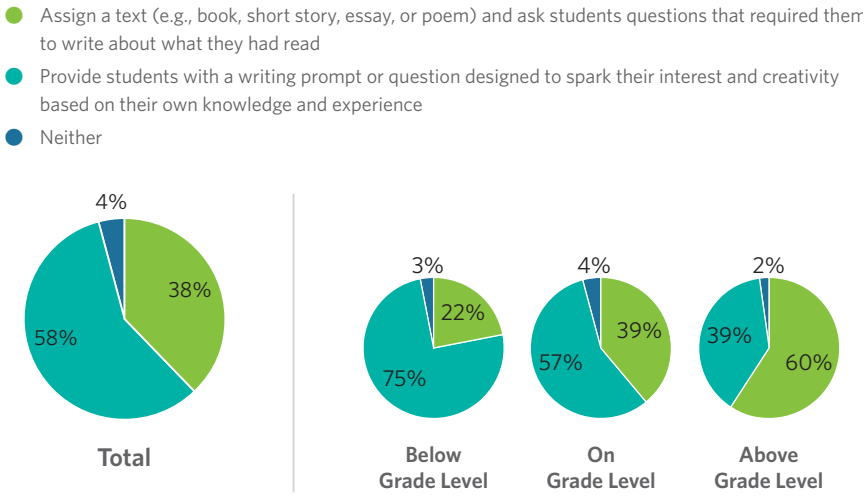


FIGURE 17: When giving writing assignments last school year, were you more likely to:



(There was quite a lot of confusion about what the standards actually required on this front. In brief, the standards called for this to gradually shift in favor of nonfiction until, in high school, about 70 percent of what they read is nonfiction. But this was supposed to be their reading diet across all the content areas; in English, they were still expected to engage in literature.)

The survey found that, indeed, nonfiction is on the rise among all grade levels, making up more than a third of the materials the teachers reported teaching.

Here again, interpreting what these findings mean is a little difficult. On the one hand, teachers are clearly responding to what the common core demands.

On the other hand, Fordham sounds like it's having some misgivings about this approach. The nonprofit notes that 40 percent of teachers reported assigning fewer "classical texts or teaching the literary canon," and if those are being replaced by a random, rather than a coherent, collection of texts, it won't benefit students, Griffith said.

Expect this finding to pique the interest of the Pioneer Institute, a Massachusetts-based group that has been one of the foremost opponents of the standards, and has repeatedly cited the loss of "classic literature" in its push against the standards.

Final Thoughts

Overall, the survey paints a mixed picture about the effect of the common core on instruction. The standards are still in use (sometimes under other names) in dozens of states, but whether they've really penetrated classrooms is a different question.

Shanahan, for one, is concerned.

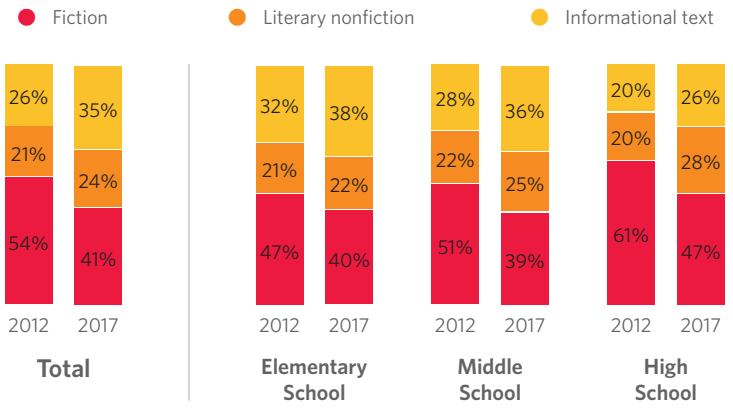
"Overall, I think this is not good," he said. "I think maybe the political brouhaha around the common core scared people away from implementation."

States may have kept the standards in place, but the fear of raising opponents' hackles might have prevented them from sharing resources with each other or providing teachers with sustained help on some of the most challenging practices, he surmised.

The data, though, are somewhat challenging to interpret, because of the survey-based issues noted above. For more perspectives on the implementation of standards in the classroom, check out the work products from the Center on Standards, Alignment, Instruction, and Learning, a research collaborative with several continuing studies.

Fordham also offers recommendations for ELA teachers. The most interesting one is to organize lessons around "text sets," or groups of texts on a theme or topic that are scaffolded in difficulty for students and help build background knowledge. Text collections are part of the work that Louisiana has assembled in its homegrown efforts to design curriculum for the common core. It's also the approach taken by several new ELA content providers such as Newsela, which focuses on nonfiction. ■

FIGURE 20: Think about the different types of reading materials that you taught last school year. percentage of time would you say went to fiction, literary nonfiction, and informational text?



Published September 25, 2018, in Education Week's Special Report: Literacy for the Workplace

Is Professional Writing the Missing Link in High School English Classes?

Some experts say students also need lessons on the kinds of writing they will one day use on the job

By Sarah D. Sparks

If you want a hint of the gap between students' writing skills and workplace demands, look at Amanda Baker's new English class in Wayne, Mich.

Forget composing technical manuals; when the Wayne Memorial High School teacher developed a new course in professional writing, she found her students weren't familiar with writing formats of people even a few years older.

"The vast majority of my class have never attempted to write email; they only text," Baker said.

While employers and educators have been working to infuse more career and technical content into K-12 curricula, studies show some of the most common writing tasks in the work world never find their way into high school English courses, and modern students may be less likely than those in previous generations to learn professional writing on their own.

"The assumption is typically that writing is a single skill, and that's not really a correct assumption. I might be good at writing scientific articles, but God help me if I had to write a novel or poetry," said Steve Graham, a writing education expert and a professor at Mary Lou Fulton Teachers College at Arizona State University. "It's pretty clear there is not a strong match between what businesses are looking for and what schools are doing. [Writing in school] really has more of an emphasis on what might happen in college than in the workplace."

From business leaders to engineers, industry professionals consistently rate written communication skills as among the most important for new workers. Yet even in the wake of new academic standards in most states that encourage more writing, educators and researchers find writing instruction inconsistent and more focused on academic than practical writing. That's why some educators and business leaders are experimenting with ways to infuse career writing into students' high school years, in or out of English class.

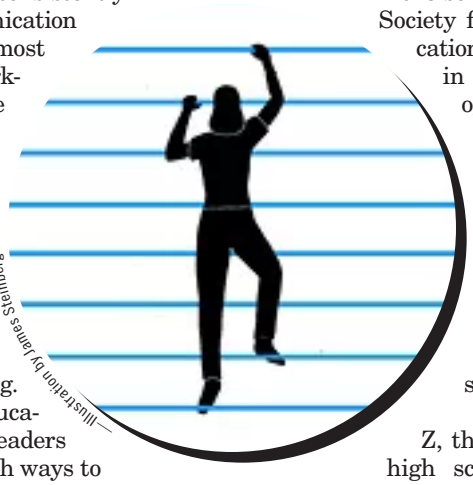


Illustration by James Steinberg

Baker's English class at Wayne Memorial High, and Tony Nassivera's business class at Hudson Falls High School in Hudson Falls, N.Y., are two cases in point.

While in two different departments, both teachers developed their courses to bring in working professionals and human-resource staff from multiple fields to help students understand what writing they will need on the job. Baker's students use simulations of common work scenarios, from company meetings to product proposals, to learn to write alone and in groups.

"In my general English class, I have to keep reminding students, 'Even if you don't become an English teacher, this will still be useful,'" Baker said. "In business writing, they see that here immediately."

What Is Workplace Writing?

Though employer surveys tend to be vague about the specific skills in "written communication," studies and interviews do show some consistent requests, including the ability to analyze and explain concepts and situations succinctly, engage in clear and courteous conversations, present evidence-backed arguments and requests, and switch tone and format to respond to different audiences.

"It's small things," said Kyleen Gray, a literacy department head at Rainbow District School Board in Ontario, who also coaches U.S. teachers in how to incorporate business writing in English. "Academic writing is almost universally third person; business communication can be as formal, but more personal and more purposeful—getting someone to buy something or hire you, for instance. A report is not the same as a [book] review."

A 2018 survey by the American Society for Engineering Education found that leaders in the science, technology, engineering, and math fields listed professional communication skills as the most important in their fields, above even problem-solving, analytical skills, and technical-writing skills.

"As you look at Gen Z, the kids in middle and high school and those entering the workforce right now, they've grown up in a world of 120 characters and Instagram; that's how they've learned to communicate," said H. John Oechsle, the president and chief executive officer of Swiftpage, a Denver-based digital marketing firm. Oechsle is also a member of Gov. John Hickenlooper's Business Experiential Learning Commission, which is working with businesses to help students develop workplace skills. "What we're finding is, as younger folks are entering the marketplace, they have a real issue with putting together short, concise, and clear written communication about something, whether it's a project or a problem that they're trying to solve. This is a real problem, and it's getting worse, not better."

National surveys of middle and high school teachers have found that even after the advent of the Common Core State Standards, which stress writing across all subjects, teachers use relatively few writing tasks frequently. Of the tasks they did use at least once a month, virtually none involved the kinds of writing that would be needed in the workplace, such as analysis or formal persuasive writing. In both middle and high schools, the most common written tasks were short-answer questions, worksheets, and note-taking while reading or listening. Explanations and analysis were used in high school but not as commonly as the other tasks.

"The most common activities involve writing without composing. How often do kids write stuff that requires more than a single page? Not very often," said Graham of Arizona State University. "There's not enough writing going on for students to meet the needs employers are looking for to be successful in the workplace."

In 2011, the National Assessment of Educational Progress changed its writing exam to focus on more real-world writing tasks, such as persuading, explaining, and conveying experiences. Little more than 1 in 4 students at either 8th or 12th grade performed proficiently on the 2011 writing exam. For example, only 23 percent of students wrote a competent or effective letter giving evidence for or against a proposed business in a town. And nearly 40 percent of students exhibited developing, marginal, or no skill at explaining a type of technology they used frequently. Moreover, 8th grade gender and racial achievement gaps were significantly wider on the writing test than in the same year's reading NAEP.

The writing test allowed students to use more digital tools for writing, such as computer-based spell-check, thesaurus, and editing functions. Students who frequently used editing and thesaurus tools performed better on the test, but most students did not use those tools.

Leveraging Tech or Pushing Back?

Like Baker, Nassivera said the transition from emotional, casual, highly abbreviated texting to business correspondence tends to be the hardest skill for students to master in his business course.

"When you are going into the professional world—I can't find a less blunt way to say it—you have to sound smart. In the way you write and the words you choose, you have to sound credible," Nassivera said. "If you are working with someone in their 50s and you are in your 20s, a smiley emoji is just not going to be considered professional."

Knowing the basic format for an email isn't enough, according to a forthcoming study in the October issue of the journal *English for Specific Purposes*. Researchers in England and Hong Kong gave students a series of assignments in which they were asked to write a series of emails with a client and a manager in an ongoing business

scenario, using information from both prior emails and a voicemail.

Stephen Bremner, an associate English professor at City University of Hong Kong who focuses on workplace communication, found the student writers faced "considerable challenges" in deciding what information to include from different texts, how to present problems, and how to consider their readers. "Students need to be encouraged to think about the relationship as well as the message and to consider the question of how to acknowledge the ongoing dialogue and relationship effectively," Bremner and his co-author noted.

In a series of assignments, Nassivera helps his students build up from their texting. Students take a recent substantive text and try to rewrite it using no abbreviations but keeping the meaning. From there, students study how businesspeople like Apple founder Steve Jobs wrote emails and memos and work their way up to writing formal e-mails to district staff.

'Immediate Payoff'

Baker said she tries to adapt her English course each year to practical skills in areas that interest students, such as writing business plans to pitch a new company or practicing the résumés, cover letters, and formal correspondence associated with job searches. That project proved particularly useful for one of Baker's 12th grade students, Jessica Leigh, who graduated this spring. "The job I found was a coaching job, and I needed the money, so I did the project but at the same time, I actually applied for the job," she said.

A few classes later, Leigh asked Baker's permission to keep her mobile phone turned on in class; she was expecting a call back from Sky Hawk Sports, the youth-coaching company she had researched.

"I put it on speaker, and everybody in class was quiet while the guy was talking with me"—to offer her the job—"but after we hung up, everybody was cheering and stuff," she said. "It was really cool."

Baker agreed. "It was so nice to see that immediate payoff for her. That is where the growth became really tangible."

Leigh noted that neither her other English nor business classes in high school taught her how to communicate in a professional environment. "I even had a marketing class where I worked in the school store and learned money handling, but it never taught me anything about writing or résumés or job interviewing. Until I had [Baker's] class, I didn't know anything about it," Leigh said.

She has continued to coach children for the sports group over the summer to save up for college to pursue a business degree later this fall.

"I'm really glad I took that class," she said, "because otherwise, I wouldn't have this job." ■

Data Snapshot

76 percent of business executives and 78 percent of hiring managers identify being able to communicate effectively in writing as a very important skill for recent college graduates.

SOURCE: Association of American Colleges and Universities, 2018

Writing in and Out of School

Most common writing tasks in secondary school:

- Note-taking while listening
- Short-answer responses
- Worksheets
- Reading analysis/interpretation
- Explanations

Common professional writing tasks:

- Clear and courteous emails
- Succinct explanation of concepts or situations
- Evidence-backed persuasive writing
- Conveying the same information for different audiences
- Conducting or responding to a written interview

SOURCE: "High School Teachers' Use of Writing to Support Students' Learning: A National Survey," Reading and Writing, 2014; Education Week

Published January 14, 2019, in Education Week's Inside School Research Blog

These Simple Writing Exercises Helped More Low-Income Students Pass Biology

By Sarah D. Sparks

At one time or another, most students feel antsy going into a big test. But how students interpret those sweaty palms and racing pulse can make or break their performance. A new study in the *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences* suggests two ways teachers can help students thrive in spite of stress.

Researchers led by Stanford University psychologist Christopher Rose found that low-income students who expressed their anxiety or reinterpreted it as positive through pre-test writing assignments significantly improved their performance on two end-of-semester biology tests. Moreover, those students were half as likely to fail the critical 9th grade gateway course as similar students who had not participated in the writing exercises.

"What students show on a test is not just what they know, and our anxieties do play in to what we're able to show," said co-author Sian Beilock, the president of Barnard College at Columbia University and an expert in the effects of anxiety on learning and performance.

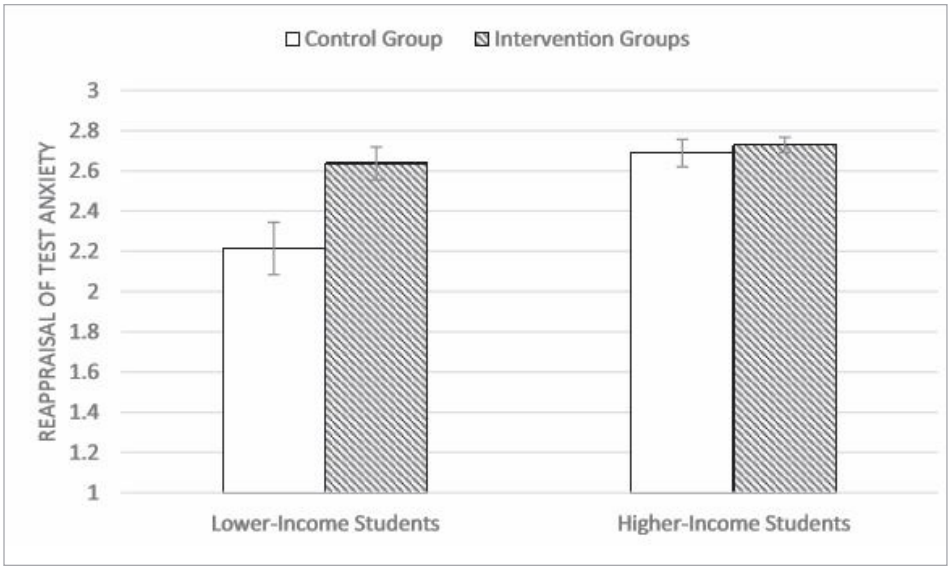
In the large, economically diverse Midwestern high school the researchers studied, low-income students were significantly more likely to fail the 9th grade biology course than their wealthier peers.

"Anecdotally, teachers who taught these courses do tend to find that students who do really poorly—and especially who fail their first-semester tests—are likely to become demotivated during the second

semester," Rozek said. "They are less interested in the material and less engaged after having kind of this negative first-semester experience with the course."

This can become a self-fulfilling prophesy, Beilock said. In STEM courses, students in poverty, women, and students of color can face added stress from stereotype threat, the added pressure to perform on students from groups that are traditionally viewed as lower-performing in a subject. The more students dwell on their worries, the less "mental bandwidth" they have to focus on the test at hand, and the less likely they are to perform well, which feeds their anxiety, Beilock said.

"There's a big disparity in terms of how lower- and higher-income students think about stress," Rozek said. "We've found that higher-income students were more likely to hold the belief that a little bit of stress before a test can actually be helpful for their performance, whereas lower-income students were less likely to view stress as helpful."



Rethinking Stress

To break that cycle, the researchers randomly assigned some of nearly 1,200 9th graders to take their mid-term and end-of-year tests as usual. Others were asked to write for 10 minutes just before taking the tests, expressing and exploring their thoughts and feelings before the exam. Still other students read and reflected on an excerpt from a 2011 study in the *Journal of Psychophysiology*, including a passage nothing that:

"Sometimes in important situations, people notice that they have a faster heartbeat, sweaty palms, shortness of breath, butterflies in their stomach, and lots of energy running through their body. People usually think that this means that they are nervous, anxious, or worried. However, these feelings happen for all kinds of reasons, and it does not mean that we need to feel worried or nervous. For example, we feel this same way when we are excited about a surprise, when we are getting ready for a fun sports competition, or when we fall in love. So, feeling a faster heartbeat, for example, doesn't mean you will perform badly. Having these feelings could actually help you!

This is because when people care about something, such as doing well on a test, our body's nervous system tells the body to release energy and deliver more oxygen to the brain. This helps you to stay alert and pay attention to the important thing that is going on in your life. Therefore, experiencing a faster heartbeat, heavy breathing, or sweaty palms could actually be a good thing. It is your body's way of pumping you full of energy and attention! But it all depends on whether you choose to use this energy. ..."

> "A lot of lower-income students are really hovering on this line between passing and failing the test in the control group."
>
> **CHRISTOPHER ROZEK**
> PSYCHOLOGIST, STANFORD UNIVERSITY

Participating in the writing tasks before the fall and spring tests had little effect on higher-income students, but for low-income students, the benefits were significant. For students who participated in the writing exercises, the test-score gap between students in poverty and higher-income students was 17 percentage points, 7 percentage points less than the performance gap between low- and higher-income students who had not participated in the writing tasks.

"A lot of lower-income students are really hovering on this line between passing and failing the test in the control group," Rozek said. "We bumped [low-income students] up 6 or 7 percentage points, which could move a student from an F to a D. That's a very important distinction for students, not only in terms of passing or failing the course, but just for what it feels like to get an F in that class."

By the end of the year, only 18 percent of the participating low-income students failed biology—less than half the 39 percent of low-income students in the control group who failed the course.

Also, low-income students who had completed either of the writing exercises showed beliefs about the benefits of stress that were closer to those of their higher-income classmates.

The researchers found equal benefits for students who wrote expressing their feelings, those who read and reflected on reinterpreting their anxiety, or both, and Rozek said the researchers plan to follow up with more experiments to try to boost the benefits of the writing exercises done together or separately. However, both he and Beilock suggested similar exercises could be helpful for students before taking other types of assessments, such as oral exams.

The takeaway for teachers, Rozek said, is, "there is great value in understanding that a student's emotions are an important part of their performance and their social-emotional well-being in school and for their academic achievement. ... Writing exercises like we used in this study could be used with their students to help support emotional well-being and help them do better on these kinds of high-stakes tests." ■

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Why is writing still a priority in today's modern classroom?

Writing is critical to communication and thinking skills.

Writing instruction helps students learn to write for different audiences and purposes, including: to persuade, to explain, to convey real or imagined experience.

The importance of helping students learn to write clearly, effectively, and efficiently cannot be underestimated.

Today's modern K-12 learner faces a unique set of challenges. Many students can struggle with the demands that the modern classroom throws at them, and progress ebbs and flows as motivation, confidence and achievement vary.

Students who face problems with writing during their formative years can suffer longer term impacts that stay with them throughout their school years, and even beyond.

At the cornerstone of learning is the skill of writing. It's a complex ability that is foundational to the development of communication and thinking. The importance of helping students to write clearly, effectively and efficiently is an educational outcome that cannot be underestimated.

What impacts writing proficiency?

Research from the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) reveals that only 27% of high school seniors are proficient in writing.

The situation is worse for low-income and minority students—less than 15%. Even more alarming is the fact that an unacceptable number of high school graduates have poor writing skills.

only 24%

of American 8th and 12th grade students are **proficient in writing**

The crux of the issue is that there's a lack of opportunity for writing practice and feedback in schools. Writing is time-consuming to produce and evaluate, which currently prevents many students from engaging in sufficient practice or receiving sufficient feedback on their writing to develop fluency. Also, a wide range of rubrics may be confusing students about what excellence looks like in writing, and may be difficult for teachers to understand where students should be grade-to-grade and subject-to-subject.

> Students need more individual feedback for writing assessment to be meaningful.

Currently, the lack of consistency in writing assessment and the lack of standardized norms make it difficult to give students useful feedback on their writing progress. Manual grading of writing assessments is labor intensive for educators, so the frequency and accuracy can be negatively impacted. Teachers have a hard time assessing writing as manual scoring takes many hours. Also, assessment is so subjective that it is difficult to know if students are actually making progress, particularly when moving from subject to subject and from teacher to teacher.

Next-Gen writing assessment tool offers standardization and personalized feedback

Frequent writing and assessment is the best way for students to learn to write well.

Automation can remove some of the manual effort of writing assessment, allowing for simpler, more frequent assessments. Technology helps with the move toward automated essay grading with benchmarks and rubrics that not only help with current assessments, but can monitor student progress over time. Because writing assessment has been so subjective, there hasn't been performance based benchmarks or norms like Lexiles and Oral Reading Fluency norms for reading, or even Quantiles for math.

In short, writing instruction is missing details around whether students are writing a grade-level, and if not, what areas need to be improved.

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WriQ® is a revolutionary piece of software from Texthelp, installed as a Google Chrome extension, it charts writing progress in real time. It provides teachers with data they have never had access to before. It's a game-changing tool that not only gives a snapshot of student writing ability, but tracks progress over time. WriQ provides much needed comparable insights making it easier to identify gaps where students need additional support, allocate invaluable district resources, progress student literacy, and improve writing performance.

By grading papers digitally, WriQ has the ability to save educators' time, allowing more time for other precious classroom activities. It's faster, more accurate and consistent than subjective, pen and paper manual assessment - giving clear visibility of progress over time against peers and standardize norms.

> "The secret sauce is about engagement. If students learn that writing and editing are engaging, they will write. And teachers will give them more opportunities to write if they can automate the assessment and deliver a consistent experience to their students."

Dave Edyburn
Professor and Associate Dean for Research and faculty development at the College of Community Innovation and Education, University of Central Florida.

How should we assess writing?

Productivity
How many words did the student actually write?

Accuracy
How many correct word sequences did the student create?

Fluency
How many correct word sequences per minute did the student produce?

Word Choice
Is the vocabulary maturity consistent with their age/ grade?

Why choosing the digital path makes sense...

Hear why some educators are looking to the future with WriQ.

Creating independent writers

Finding the right mix of digital tools to help students do their best is Sally Garza's biggest challenge. Sally is the Upper School Technology Director at Lawrence School in Northfield, Ohio. She teaches all 9th grade Learning Strategies courses on the writing process. Garza wants students to be independent writers and to follow the writing process themselves.

> "WriQ provides good data about how a student is doing with writing. Qualitative and quantitative data tell me if a student is on-pace with his writing and how he is making progress over time. It leaves me more time for differentiation and 1:1 instruction, and I have real data to share with students and parents. Having the data is more persuasive than just a subjective opinion from the teacher."

Removing teacher subjectivity from Writing Assessment

Clark County (NV) Public Schools are also using WriQ to assess student writing. Natalie Jones, Assistive Technology Specialist Itinerant, and Eladio Rodriguez, Assistive Technology Services Specialist, wanted to remove teacher subjectivity from the writing assessment process. They also wanted students to write more and to improve the quality of their writing, as previously, their students were writing very little. They have found that WriQ is easy to use and provides helpful data to support initiatives for their students.

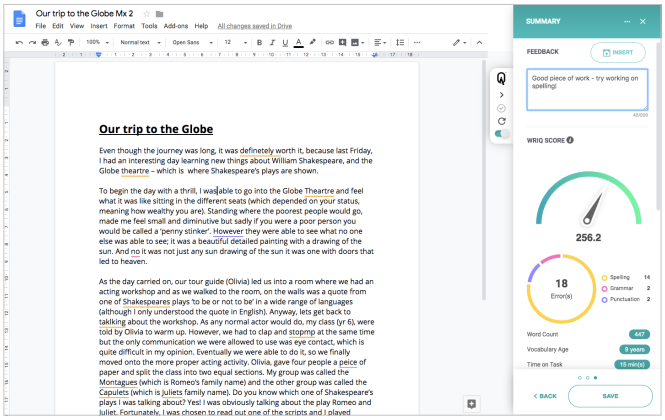
> "We wanted to see where we could help students improve. In the WriQ data we saw that middle schoolers had fewer punctuation errors than students in high school. We needed to develop some specific teaching strategies to address that. We asked the middle school teachers for their best practices and then asked high school teachers to mirror the intervention. The collaboration between teachers helped relight the spark of interest in trying new tech tools because they are now excited to see students' writing progress. WriQ is effective and efficient.
>
> Teachers don't have time to score writing themselves. This is another way to give students meaningful feedback and track them over time. Teachers can easily share data with administrators and parents and use it to develop independent writers."

How WriQ helps educators improve student writing

Less than one-third of K-12 students are proficient writers. As the ability to write clearly is an integral part of 21st century skills, it is essential that we address this shortfall in skill development.

Running in the background while students are writing, WriQ automatically assesses students' writing and creates metrics that inform teacher instruction and student learning. WriQ's automated assessment correlates to the teacher's assessment 97% of the time.

To do this, Texthelp has worked with academia and many educational institutions to grade over 120,000 documents, with over 20,000 users to create what we call the 'WriQ score'.



WRIQ® the writing metric

The WriQ score is based on:

Productivity

Writing output — how many words did students actually write?

Accuracy

Grammatical accuracy — how many correct word sequences did they create?

Pace

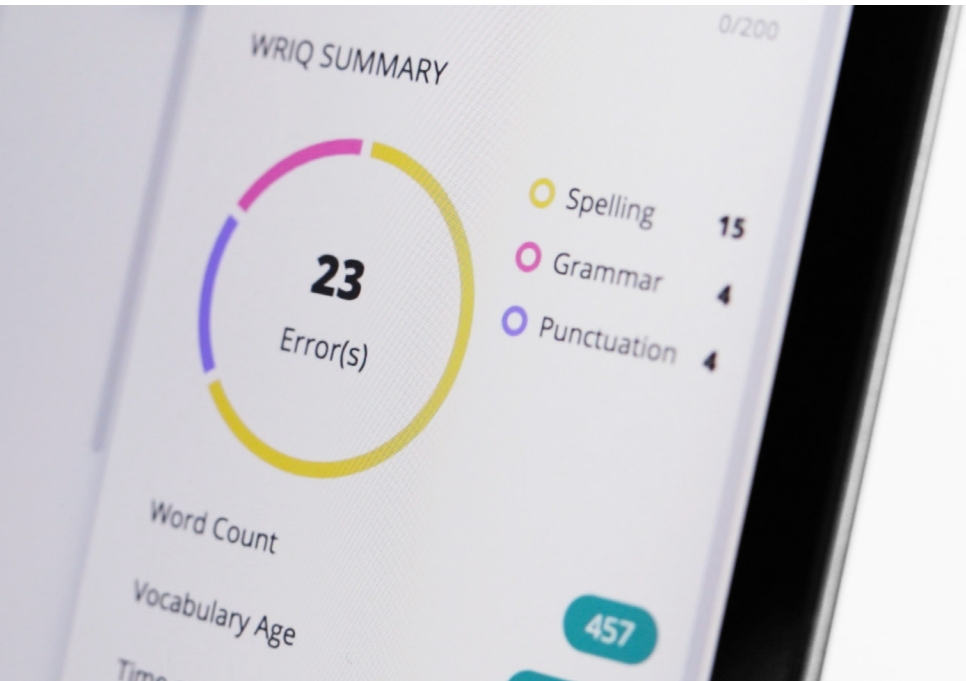
Writing speed or pace — how much time did they spend on task?

Maturity

How does their **vocabulary maturity** compare with national norms?

All of which collectively provides a meaningful number to help teachers know how well their students are writing.

The advantage? WriQ creates a base of information that allows benchmarking of writing norms to measure improvement at both the individual student and classroom level. All without causing educators any additional workload or time.



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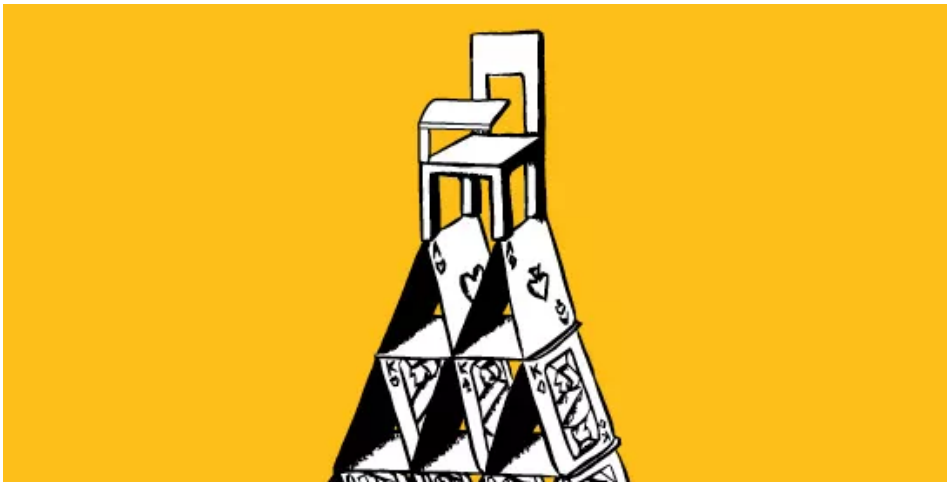

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COMMENTARY

Published February 20, 2019, in Education Week

The Problem With Literacy Programs

By Mike Schmoker

A cautionary tale: Not long ago, I was assisting a school district that had adopted a prominently endorsed literacy program. Our work began with a review of the program, which had an unassailable conceptual base. Yet as several of us examined it, we noticed some profound shortcomings: The program abounded in minutiae, low-level worksheets, and excessive skills instruction, leaving little time for reading, discussion, and writing. Moreover, its highly scripted lessons were patently misconceived—the content and assessments were misaligned with the unfocused, haphazardly assembled array of (so-called) "learning objectives." In other words, the lessons lacked the most obvious elements of good teaching. For all this, the program's visiting consultants had recently doubled down on their insistence that it had to be followed to the letter.

Here's where it gets interesting. Our concerns led to conversations with the program's highest-ranking official and one of its prominent endorsers. Point by point, they conceded that our perceptions were accurate, that the exigencies of program development had led to significant gaps between the program's initial conception and its actual teaching materials. To their credit, they urged us—contrary to the company's on-site consultants—to replace large portions of the program with those elements it lacked. On our own, they said, we should include more purposeful reading, high-quality books, discussion, and explicit writing instruction.

This wasn't my first such experience. Over the years, my colleagues and I have made similarly damning discoveries about other nationally prominent literacy and curricular products. When pressed, many of their creators would admit to the inadequacies. One highly respected expert told me that not one of these literacy programs meets the criteria most essential to English/language arts and literacy curricula (which I describe below).

Given the supreme importance of literacy to academic and life success, what should we learn from this—and what should we do about it?

First, we must reckon with the fact that even popular, highly praised commercial programs often *lack a robust evidence base*. That's because they are deficient in precisely those aspects most critical to acquiring the ability to read, write, and speak well. Instead, they abound in busywork—worksheets, group activities, and multiple-choice exercises. Until this changes, we should build our own English/language arts and literacy curricula—or demand that publishers and philanthropy-backed programs meet the following parameters in key areas (most of which apply across the curriculum):

Reading. For beginning readers, we need to start with a solid, intensive phonics regimen. That's indispensable. At the same time, we need to remember that phonics instruction is not, as Daniel Willingham recently wrote, a "literacy program." I share his concern that phonics can be overemphasized at the expense of the "lifeblood" of literacy—abundant amounts of reading, speaking, and writing in all disciplines. Even before students fully master phonics-based decoding, they should be reading—and listening to—large amounts of fiction and nonfiction.

As literacy expert Timothy Shanahan points out, nothing consolidates fledgling decoding skills like actual reading *and* reading along as the teacher reads aloud. For experts like Shanahan and Richard Allington, students should be reading for at least an hour a day, across subject areas. We're not even close to such a target in most schools. Without this, many students never acquire the knowledge and vocabulary essential to fluency and reading comprehension. Curriculum and program developers should conduct an honest audit of how many quality books and texts students are actually reading each week, in every course. Such audits typically reveal a startling paucity of these texts.

Discussion. Students should frequently engage in whole-class, full-participation discussions, debates, and seminars about what they read, starting in the early grades. They need regular, explicit instruction in how to speak clearly, audibly, and with civility in every subject and grade level. When I do demonstration lessons for teachers, it is often apparent that students aren't being taught these vital communication skills.

Writing. Students need to be writing about what they read almost daily for mostly higher-order purposes, for example, to analyze or compare literary and historical figures, events, and concepts; to explain, make arguments, and justify interpretations. This daily written work—which need not always be collected or scored—should be the basis for longer, more formal papers. And it's high time we built specifications for the number and length of major writing

assignments into every subject-area curriculum.

Explicit literacy instruction. All students must be taught how to read increasing amounts of grade-level text in each discipline. Teachers should routinely provide scaffolding that includes embedded vocabulary instruction and background knowledge prior to every reading. They should do step-by-step modeling of purposeful, analytic reading (which varies according to purpose and subject). Students should practice analytic reading—by underlining, annotating, or taking notes—followed by "checks for understanding," as the teacher monitors and adjusts instruction to ensure that students are successfully comprehending and analyzing text. Such efforts raise students' ability to comprehend challenging text by multiple grade levels. Discussion and writing should be taught just as explicitly and frequently.

In addition, many programs should shed their prejudice against well-structured, whole-class teaching. As recently reported in *Education Week*, there has been a precipitous rise in small-group instruction. Some amount of this can be useful, but as Shanahan and I have discussed, many small-group lessons could be taught just as effectively to an entire class, with an exponential increase in teacher contact time. The encroachment of small-group instruction has meant that students now spend disconcerting amounts of time at independent learning "centers." The value of these is greatly inflated: Their prevalence helps account for Michael Ford and Michael Opitz's finding that students spend record amounts of time on "cut, color, and paste activities." They estimate that only about one-third of the elementary "literacy block" has any academic value.

As commercial, philanthropic, or district entities gear up to develop or improve literacy and curricular programs, we must demand that they honor the above criteria. Because if they do, make no mistake—swift, significant improvements will ensue in all academic areas. ■

Mike Schmoker is an author, speaker, and consultant. His books include FOCUS, 2nd Edition (ASCD, 2018) and Leading with FOCUS (ASCD, 2016).

COMMENTARY

Published October 31, 2018, in Education Week Teacher

More Than Rough and Final Drafts: Making Feedback Meaningful for Student Writers

By Jesse Breite

As an English teacher, nothing is more frustrating to me than students disregarding feedback because of an emotional response to a grade.

My colleagues and I hope that students will review past mistakes in order to prevent future mistakes, but high schoolers are busy. When work piles up before a due date, they're not likely to look at the feedback on their last paper, especially if they have misguided excuses justifying the grade they received on it. If I am honest about my high school experience, I can't say I looked at a previous paper before starting the next one. I'm not even sure I did that as an undergrad.

As teachers, we make the same mistake. How often do we pull up the last paper a student wrote to see how much he or she has grown? Maybe sometimes, but I would argue it's rare.

For meaningful writing instruction, teachers should consider another paradigm.

Reimagining the Writing Process

This school year, our English department adopted a policy that focuses on feedback as a part of the writing process rather than the outcome. Students now have more opportunity to incorporate edits and grow as writers within each assignment, rather than teachers assuming they will demonstrate progress in the next assignment.

The small group of 10th to 12th grade teachers I worked with to develop this system agreed that we wanted all students to revise major written assignments as a response to teacher feedback. For this to work, feedback would need to be front-loaded, motivating attention to the teacher commentary itself. Students would then need at least a week to participate in the feedback cycle and revise the paper.

This plan wouldn't replace the essay planning that teachers already did in English classes, such as the prewriting process or the peer-edited rough draft. Instead, we added a new step: an "advanced" draft, turned in after the rough draft and before the final.

In the past, when teachers had assigned rough drafts, they were always a little too rough. "Advanced" draft felt aspirational and conveyed what we expected of our students under this new system—that they would turn in the best work

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that they could at that moment in time for teacher feedback.

Under this formula, the student no longer thinks in terms of the rough draft or outline minimum requirements—"How many quotes do I need in this paragraph/paper?"—for an acceptable grade. Instead, the student and the teacher can focus more on stylistic quality.

Ideally, the farther the student can take the advanced draft toward accomplishing the rubric goals, the higher the chances are that a student's work will improve on the final draft. The advanced draft would receive the most feedback in the process and a placeholder grade in the gradebook.

Final draft teacher feedback would be minimal because the revision process would be finished. This system would create a longer grading process for writing assignments, but it would hopefully create more satisfying final drafts for teachers and students.

Motivating Revision

The advanced draft process is also a form of differentiated instruction, because students at any ability level can be coached through revision. Students determine how much work they put into the advanced draft. High-quality student work allows teachers to coach with more specific feedback, whereas weak drafts get less detailed, simplistic comments. The system also gives poor performance (for a host of legitimate reasons or excuses) a second chance. And if students choose not to turn in an advanced draft, they lose the opportunity for teacher feedback.

Because of the stakes in the revision, our group determined that teachers and students must agree to a reasonable and quick turnaround. We decided to return advanced drafts within one to two weeks—enough time to meet with a teacher in office hours or make an appointment with our school's writing center. If students wait until the night before the final draft is due, lack of planning can hurt student progress. Momentum propels draft to feedback to draft.

Of course, momentum is also maintained by the student's belief in his or her progress, and the teacher's ability to encourage that progress. Though a grade is an imperfect and reductive measure of student progress, it can also be a motivator. For this reason, we decided to allow the final draft grade to replace the advanced draft grade. Teachers have some freedom here if they want to count the advanced draft as a percentage of the final. But grade replacement allows certain students to take risks, and it can give poor planners a candid impression of where their advanced draft grade stands.

Before introducing the new policy to our department, we practiced in our own classrooms. Two teachers within our group who used the new system noted how much more teacher feedback caught the attention of their students. More students were coming to office hours with questions about writing craft, and teachers were enjoying the opportunity to have meaningful conversations. I personally felt more satisfaction grading those final drafts.

As our department has adopted the new system, some teachers have had to spend more time planning for the week they will grade and return advanced drafts. But teachers have also noted how much students appreciate the quick turnaround while the work is fresh in their minds. The process hasn't inspired every reluctant writer: One colleague expressed some disappointment that students did not take as much advantage in the final as she might have hoped. But teachers agree that the advanced draft has allowed for more honest conversation at each stage of the drafting process. And teachers have expressed relief that the final draft requires less feedback.

The number of student visits to the writing center increased this fall, and tutors have learned to use a common departmental language as students bring in their advanced drafts to have conversations about improving through revision. As a department, we hope advanced drafts have brought us a step closer to a culture in which students learn to reflect through the writing process, rather than just trying to manage their workload. ■

Jesse Breite teaches at The Westminster Schools in Atlanta. His recent poetry has been published in Terrain, Spillway, and New Orleans Review. His professional learning community on revision included Kristin Hunter, Jen Dracos-Tice, and Amy Patel.

COMMENTARY

Published August 1, 2018, in Education Week Teacher

Want Young Students to Love Writing? Let Them Play With It

By Emily Galle-From

This summer I attended a literacy conference near my school district. The agenda was jam-packed with strategies and insights, inspiring teachers to develop literacy-rich practices for the upcoming year. The conference brought in "big name" educators and consultants: Harvey "Smokey" Daniels, Kate Roberts, and Ralph Fletcher. Each speaker was engaging and informative. Yet my biggest takeaway did not come from these professionals—it came from talking and reflecting with other educators.

Early in his keynote, children's book author Ralph Fletcher invited members of the audience to turn and share, using a 1 to 10 scale, how comfortable they feel teaching writing. I was shocked to hear people mumble and laugh at their low numbers: 1s, 2s, perhaps a 4. A woman behind me bemoaned that teaching writing was the worst part of her day—a time when kids melted down, cried, and threw tantrums.

When asked to explain more, she said that her 1st graders hated the "assignments." All year long she'd had them writing thesis statements backed up by three points and concluded with a wrap-up sentence. Over and over and over again. *First graders*. Honestly, I'd cry, too.

I quickly realized that I was the anomaly in the room: an elementary school teacher whose *favorite* subject to teach is writing. The more I listened to others, the more clear it became that we,

as educators, need to rethink our writing practices.

Finding Joy Within the Standards

Writing grounds us in our humanity. We hear so much—and for good reason—about the importance of reading in elementary schools. But I'd argue that writing is just as important as reading for fostering a sense of identity and creativity.

Think about the Thai boys who were trapped in a cave. The first mode of communication to their families was delivered through letters. Or consider the recently released letters Nelson Mandela wrote to his wife and children over the years he spent in prison. In both instances, writing was a means to process and communicate with those they loved.

Yes, educators must teach to certain writing standards. But reaching standards and finding joy, creativity, and a sense of identity through writing are not mutually exclusive. Rather, I feel more confident that my students are reaching the standards when they find joy in what they write.

Where I teach, in Minnesota, one of the 1st grade writing standards declares that students should "write narratives and other creative texts in which they recount two or more appropriately sequenced events, include some details regarding what happened, use temporal words to signal event order, and provide some sense of closure." Note that the word "creative" is right there in the standard! The standard is also quite broad and allows room for children to write in various forms and styles. When teachers dictate what or how students write during a school year, it limits their potential.

Creating 'Max' and Dragons

Fletcher said in his keynote at the conference that "you want writers to play." Ideally, they should have fun, take risks, and find enjoyment while writing. Kids *love* playing, and so this seems like an easy and natural idea to bring into a writer's workshop. Truth be told, a teacher doesn't need to put a lot of work in behind this: Kids will play any chance they get. I can think of countless times this has paid off in my classroom.

This spring, for example, my 1st grade students were working on writing narratives. One student created a character named Max. The student wrote story after story about Max, each one building upon, and getting more ridiculous than, the last.

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Fast forward to the end of June—weeks after the school year ended. Before boarding the bus after a day of summer school, Max's creator came rushing up to me with a picture of a robot he painted during art that day. My initial reaction was, "Cool robot!" But when I looked closer I saw the name MAX scrawled across the robot's chest.

"Hey, it says 'Max.' Is this the same Max from your series?" I asked him.

"Yes! In my new story, Max is a robot!" He beamed.

It's important to note that I was not his teacher for summer school. I was not in the art room with him. It was not even writing time. Yet this student continues to play with Max any chance he gets. He feels a sense of ownership with this new character and engages with him even after the last day of school. This young 1st grader won't soon forget Max.

Other 1st graders enjoy playing with their writing form and style, too. I think about a different student who engineered a dragon whose tail moves on the page, thanks to some strips of paper and a bit of tape. Had I insisted that he write the words of his story first or put strict guidelines on the assignment, he never would have created that dragon.

Another 1st grader realized that she is truly in charge of her characters by placing me into her stories. She had me doing all sorts of quirky things, like eating my own hair and jumping over buildings. She giggled while writing, finding pleasure in placing her teacher in strange scenarios.

Playing with writing is crucial to finding one's voice and enjoying the creative process. It's nearly impossible to dislike something once you've played around with it.

Early in the school year, students in my class saw writing as an enjoyable part of the day. I certainly knew something was going well with our writing workshop when many began to choose to write instead of participate in our "brain break" time. I often overheard a couple of students planning their work: "You write and I'll illustrate." And one day another student—my most reluctant writer—asked if he could keep writing instead of dance to get his wiggles out.

A Safe Space to Process Emotions

Ironically, when students play with their writing, they are also more likely to take it seriously. During our poetry unit, I modeled how poets think of things that are important to them and then reflect upon why those items are important. I decided to write about a quilt my grandmother made me before she passed away. While I was writing, a student raised his hand and began sharing—for the first time—about his father who died unexpectedly earlier in the school year.

He asked questions about my grandmother's funeral and compared it with his dad's. The other 1st graders in the room sat silently, listening to the student process. Later, the student wrote about when he saw his dad in the coffin: "His skin didn't seem real / he had a different smell." I doubt this student would have written such powerful lines had he not felt comfortable taking risks with his words.

I had no intention of having a conversation about death when I chose to model writing about my grandmother's quilt. Yet writing provided this child a safe space to grapple with his father's death and an opportunity for others in the room to support him through his pain.

Teachers: As the days of summer start to slip away, consider when in your day you will build time for students to write next year. When will they have time to play with language and form? When will they collaborate with others? Where will emotion seep onto the page? With intentionality, the standards will be taught. But it is the joy, playfulness, and humanity of writing that students will remember. ■

Emily Galle-From graduated from Luther College in 2011 with a degree in elementary education and a specialty in literacy, and from Penn State World Campus in 2017 with her master's of education in curriculum and instruction, with an emphasis in children's literature. She has taught at Richardson Elementary School in North St. Paul, Minn., for seven years, first as a literacy specialist and currently as a 1st grade teacher. Galle-From is also on her school's leadership team and co-chairs the districtwide language arts committee. You can follow her on Twitter at @EmilySkeie.

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COMMENTARY

Published September 15, 2018, in Education Week Teacher

Is 1:1 Technology the Elixir for Bad Writing?

By Elizabeth Brown

We are graduating bad writers. Despite increases in the number of students finishing high school and enrolling in four-year colleges, poor writing is ubiquitous. Students with subpar writing skills end up struggling in English 101 or in remedial college classes. Many resort to using "paper mills," or paying online writing services to craft essays, or even dissertations, for them.

Having taught writing to students in high school, college, and at a correctional institution, I have found commonalities in poor writing habits across these settings. The degree of struggle runs the spectrum, from writers who are barely able to write a sensible paragraph to hidden gems who are steeped in trepidation.

After working in a high-performing high school in Plainville, Conn., which has adopted 1:1 technology, I'm convinced we've stumbled on the elixir for writing ailments.

The 1:1 technology initiative provides each student with a light, wireless laptop to use both inside and outside of school. Emerging writers need a modern tool with which to flex their writing muscles, precisely what the 1:1 technology offers—convenience, freedom, and more instant and frequent feedback, extending the dialogue beyond the classroom walls. The learning is dynamic, personalized, and organic, leading to less scripted and stilted writing.

The classroom ambiance is a writing instructor's dream—the dim lights, soft clicking, students wired into writing. And how can we discount the trees spared—in the billions.

Paper and pencil is like parchment and charcoal to the tech-savvy students of the digital era. We have pushed and prodded and forced our students to endure an archaic model of education for too long, and in the process, created a generation of dysfunctional writers burdened with an assortment of neurotic writing habits.

I've observed a myriad of writing neuroses, mostly anxiety induced—from the gifted writer's eloquent style obscured by awkward phrasing and grammar faux pas, to the passive aggressive writer's intentional misspellings and punctuation omissions, to the inept yet honest writer lacking finesse and deficient in the most basic skills. These perplexing behaviors are learned over time, perhaps in response to a forced writing instruction deemed irrelevant to the 21st-century student, and considered banal in comparison to a rich technological world outside the classroom walls.

One-to-one technology gives tech-savvy students a greater level of comfort with the writing process. The more familiar and comfortable the student feels, the more inspired he or she will be to write, freely and more frequently.

When students are frustrated with writing instruction, it is revealed in the product—the poor writing they produce and their indifference or shame of it. For some, the awkward writing is intentional, almost retaliatory. And for others, sadly, it is their best, even if it is incoherent.

Writing should be exploratory and organic in nature. All students deserve the opportunity to use technology and to type

their ideas freely and uninhibitedly. Writing rarely takes a linear course. In fact, the finish line is nonexistent, as the writer is continually revising and improving. High-quality writing instruction requires the most efficient tool to manage multiple drafts and revisions. An English teacher working with a pen and paper is at a disadvantage.

I am witness to it. In our study of William Golding's *The Lord of the Flies* last spring, my freshmen chose a character to analyze. They typed freely, unencumbered, explored "Ralph's inept leadership," Jack's "descent into savagery," Simon's "innate morality," Piggy's "social awkwardness," along with Golding's take on our brutish nature. Only in a few situations did I have to remind them to "elaborate." The ideas flowed, unimpeded. Afterward, we took it a step further, and students provided a psychological report of their character in a creatively designed presentation via Google Slides.

Nevertheless, despite the many benefits, some critics view 1:1 technology as the leviathan of the modern classroom, pointing to the potential data mining, privacy breaches, and early recruitment to a lifetime of Google, for instance.

Yet, technology is here to stay, and it is our job as educators to be flexible and progressive, rather than encouraging neurotic behaviors and a resistance to writing.

The day before spring break, I reminded students to keep at their essays and fine-tune their theses. With their laptops they have a solid footing, and I am confident they will be writing and sending me ideas, drafts, and revisions along the way.

I'm hopeful that 1:1 technology initiatives help students feel unfettered freedom to hone their writing skills and build confidence and expertise—eventually putting the paper mills out of business once and for all. ■

Elizabeth Brown is a native of Connecticut and an English adjunct and writing tutor at Goodwin College and Asnuntuck Community College. She also taught college English to early-release inmates in the Second Chance Pell Program, and at the secondary level in various suburban and inner-city high schools. Her writing has been featured in the Hartford Courant and literary magazines such as Pithead Chapel, Gravel, Literary Orphans, Sleet, and Wilderness House Literary Review.

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