

Writing Instruction That Works

Proven Methods
for Middle and High School
Classrooms

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A Joint Publication With



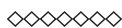


Contents

Preface	vii
Acknowledgments	ix
1. Writing Today	1
Considerable Progress: Recent History of School Writing	2
Improved Writing Instruction and Obstacles to Good Practice	4
An Opportunity and a Challenge:	
The Context of Schooling and Its Effect on Writing	7
A Closer Look at This Book and the Research Behind It	8
2. Writing Instruction in Schools Today	12
How Much Extended Writing Do Students Do?	13
Who Reads What Students Write?	15
What Is the Effect of High-Stakes Tests?	16
What Kinds of Writing Instruction Do Teachers Emphasize?	20
Writing Then and Now	22
The Bottom Line	26
3. Writing in the English Language Arts	28
<i>Christine Dawson</i>	
Effective Writing Instruction in English Language Arts	28
The Writing Students Are Asked to Do in English	30
Portraits of Success	32
English and the Common Core Standards	44
The Bottom Line	46
Future Directions	48

4. Writing in Social Studies/History	50
The Background for Writing in Social Studies/History	50
The Writing Students Are Asked to Do in Social Studies/History	51
Portraits of Success	55
Social Studies/History and the Common Core Standards	67
The Bottom Line	68
Future Directions	69
5. Writing in Mathematics	71
<i>Michael P. Mastroianni</i>	
The Call for Writing in Mathematics	71
The Writing Students Are Asked to Do in Mathematics	72
Portraits of Success	74
Mathematics and the Common Core Standards	89
The Bottom Line	90
Future Directions	92
6. Writing in Science	94
<i>Marc Nachowitz</i>	
The Background for Writing in Science	94
The Writing Students Are Asked to Do in Science	95
Portraits of Success	98
Science and the Common Core Standards	107
The Bottom Line	108
Future Directions	109
7. Technology and the Teaching of Writing	111
Background on the Impact of Technology on Writing	112
Uses of Technology for Writing at School	114
Portraits of Success	117
Technology and the Common Core Standards	125
The Bottom Line	126
Future Directions	128

8. English Language Learners	130
<i>Kristen Campbell Wilcox</i>	
Writing Instruction for ELLs and Non-ELLs	131
Typical Practice in a High-Diversity School District	134
Portraits of Success	135
ELLs and the Common Core Standards	141
The Bottom Line	142
Future Directions	144
9. Students in Poverty	146
The Background for Writing in High-Poverty Schools	147
The State of Writing in Higher Poverty Schools	148
Portraits of Success	152
Students in Poverty and the Common Core Standards	168
The Bottom Line	168
Future Directions	170
10. Reclaiming Writing in the Academic Disciplines	172
The Teaching of Writing for the 21st Century	173
The Challenge and Opportunity of the Common Core	178
Writing in the 21st Century	185
Appendix A: The Project Team	187
Appendix B: Characteristics of Participating Schools (Year 3)	189
References	191
About the Authors	201



Preface

You are reading this book thanks to the perseverance, hard work, networking, and persuasive skills of Richard Sterling, past director of the National Writing Project. It must have been in the year 2000 or 2001 that he first contacted Arthur about replicating the study he had done in 1979–80, published in 1981 as *Writing in the Secondary School: English and the Content Areas*. Richard felt the field needed an update on the state of writing instruction in American schools as a basis for making informed decisions about what was needed—in research and in practice. This first invitation met with a resounding “No.” Arthur felt that too much had changed in the field, in educational policy, and in technology. Thus a replication of the first study did not make sense. But Richard persisted and also invited Judith to become involved. Finally, in 2005, with funds from the National Writing Project and the College Board, and a very much updated research agenda and research design, the National Study of Writing Instruction (NSWI) was born. In all, it involved 4 years of data collection interspersed with 2 additional years of analysis and synthesis of results. The final 3 years of work were funded by the Spencer Foundation as well as the National Writing Project.

Why did we do the study? Why did Arthur change his mind and say “Yes”? Why did Judith become involved? For both, the answer was in the timing. The No Child Left Behind Act was passed in 2002, legislation that carried higher stakes than ever, with immediate implications for teachers, students, and schools based on the test results. The rhetoric of the time demanded an improvement in literacy achievement, but in practice *literacy* meant reading, not writing. By the year 2005 our questions had become:

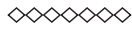
- What *is* happening in writing?
- What kinds of writing are students doing in English, social studies/history, mathematics, and science on a typical day?
- What kinds of instruction are they receiving?
- Has writing been sidelined in daily practice as teachers respond to the calls for a focus on reading?

- What about English language learners and students in poverty: What are their writing experiences like in comparison to their age-mates?
- And finally, what does writing look like given the rapid changes in the technologies for both creating and presenting information and ideas?

These questions were strongly related to the work each of us had been doing for most of our professional careers. They promised to move us, as well as the field, to new understandings about the interplay of broad educational policies, school and district emphases in curriculum and instruction, changes in social resources such as technology, and students' opportunities to learn to write well. They also promised to tell us, "What is writing literacy today and what can it be tomorrow?"

We describe the various parts of the new NSWI study in Chapter 1, with additional details available online (Applebee & Langer, 2011a). But the meat of the book is in the findings about current practice as well as the many examples of exemplary instruction; these are found in Chapters 2 through 9. Chapter 10 is both our reprise of *what is* and our vision of *what can be*—of the critical role writing can play in each of the major subject areas, across the middle and high school years, for all students.

CHAPTER 1



Writing Today

This book addresses a seemingly simple question: What and how are students in U.S. middle and high schools learning to write?

What seems like a straightforward question, however, masks a number of complex issues in literacy instruction. Three in particular shape the chapters that follow:

- To what extent does present-day writing instruction reflect “good practice” as indicated by research and policy statements on learning to write?
- How do content-area teachers outside of the English language arts, as well as English teachers, address the disciplinary demands of writing in their subject areas?
- How does the larger context for instruction, including the standards and assessments in individual subject areas, alter the writing experiences that students have?

To address these questions, we will be looking closely at students and teachers in schools across the country—some struggling with the many demands being placed upon our schools, others offering new visions of the role that writing can play when students are engaged in challenging subject matter across their core academic subjects. There are several themes that run through our discussion, including the following:

- The story of considerable progress in the teaching of writing over the past 30 years
- Some serious obstacles that constrain attention to writing in many schools and classrooms
- The opportunity and challenge to realign curriculum and instruction around the reading and writing skills that are central to each discipline

Together, they move us toward a vision of what writing at school can be like in the 21st century.

CONSIDERABLE PROGRESS: RECENT HISTORY OF SCHOOL WRITING

Since the late 1990s there has been a renewed and very public effort to improve the literacy performance of the nation's children and adolescents. This has included direct attempts to improve practice through new standards and assessments, enshrined in the No Child Left Behind (NCLB) legislation of 2002. There also has been an emphasis on research (and research syntheses) with a focus on "what works." At first, these efforts targeted reading at the primary grade levels, including the Reading First initiative and the National Reading Panel report (Langenberg, 2000), commissioned jointly by the U.S. Department of Education and the National Institute of Child Health and Human Development. Later, the effort broadened to include writing, both as an ancillary skill and as a "comprehension strategy" that contributes to general literacy development (Pressley, Allington, Wharton-McDonald, Block, & Morrow, 2001; Torgesen et al., 2007). The focus also expanded from the initial stages of literacy development to the higher level skills that emerge in the middle and high school years (Biancarosa & Snow, 2006).

Focus on the "Second R"

Although these syntheses mentioned both reading and writing, their major focus was on reading and the instruction needed to improve it. Pushing back against this limited view of literacy, the National Commission on Writing in America's Schools and Colleges (2003), sponsored by the College Board, called writing the "Neglected R" in American classrooms and emphasized the importance of writing ability as a tool both for learning and for economic growth and social advancement. The commission's report included a broad list of needed reforms, including calls for teacher professional development, changes in curriculum, and significant increases in the amount of writing that students are required to do. Graham and Perin's (2007) report, *Writing Next*, took the process further, synthesizing research on effective writing instruction in order to better foster "evidence-based" practice. Taken together, these and related reports began to reinstate writing as a domain that needed specific attention in any effort to help adolescents gain the literacy skills and knowledge needed for their present schooling and future success.

The Common Core State Standards

Building on this work, writing is also featured in the *Common Core State Standards* (Council of Chief State School Officers [CCSSO] & National

Governors Association [NGA], 2010) as a major component of literacy in English as well as in the other core academic subjects. As the introduction to the standards describes it,

Literacy standards for grade 6 and above are predicated on teachers of ELA, history/social studies, science and technical subjects using their content-area expertise to help students meet particular challenges of reading, writing, speaking, listening, and language in their respective fields. (p. 3)

The college and career ready standards that anchor the document identify ten specific standards for writing in English and other subjects. In slightly abbreviated form, the standards state that, across subject areas, students should be able to do the following tasks:

1. Write arguments to support claims in an analysis of substantive topics or texts
2. Write informative/explanatory texts to examine and convey complex ideas and information clearly and accurately
3. Write narratives to develop real or imagined experiences or events
4. Produce clear and coherent writing in which the development, organization, and style are appropriate to task, purpose, and audience
5. Develop and strengthen writing as needed by planning, revising, editing, rewriting, or trying a new approach
6. Use technology, including the Internet, to produce and publish writing
7. Conduct short as well as more sustained research projects
8. Gather relevant information from multiple print and digital sources, assess the credibility and accuracy of each source, and integrate the information while avoiding plagiarism
9. Draw evidence from literary or informational texts to support analysis, reflection, and research
10. Write routinely over extended time frames (time for research, reflection, and revision) and shorter time frames (a single sitting or a day or two) for a range of tasks, purposes, and audiences (p. 18)

Elaborated further to suggest appropriate goals by grade level, K–12, the standards outline an ambitious agenda for the teaching of discipline-specific writing in the next generation of curriculum and instruction. The writing standards for English language arts Grades 6 through 12 (pp. 42–47) are modified slightly for history/social studies, science, and technical subjects (pp. 64–66) by emphasizing the importance of discipline-specific content, norms, and conventions.