

Research Brief

Writing in the Content Areas

Question: Why is writing in the content areas important to students' academic growth?

Summary of Findings:

In an effort for schools to obtain Adequate Yearly Progress, the pressure is on to make certain that students are loaded with as much information as possible in order to score well on the high stakes tests. Writing has continued to move down the list of priorities of what is taught because: it is not being tested or is minimally being assessed; it is time consuming to write and to grade; many teachers view grading as marking up a paper with grammar and spelling corrections; and most teachers are not well trained in how to teach, assess writing and/or utilize the results. A study from the National Assessment of Educational Progress in 2002 reported that 49% of high school seniors were given writing assignments of three or more pages once to twice a month, while 39% stated that never or very rarely were assigned writing. The study also found that 24% of twelfth grade students, 31% of eighth graders and 28% of fourth grade students were at or above proficient in writing. 14% of students in post-secondary education are placed in a pre-college writing course, with a high percentage of them coming from minority groups, low socioeconomic levels and/or are non-native English language speakers (*Writing to learn*). Most jobs require some form of writing such as technical reports, formal reports, instructional manuals, memos, correspondence and/or letters. Most students are not well prepared to write at the skill level that will be required of them.

...writing is best understood as a complex intellectual activity that requires students to stretch their minds, sharpen their analytical capabilities and make valid and accurate distinctions. ...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 neglected "R": The need for a writing revolution, 51).

The brain is pattern-seeking and works from whole-to part-to whole. When information enters the brain, it seeks to find the areas where it has prior knowledge so that it can be more deeply developed. This process allows the brain to make sense of the information and go into its long-term memory. When a student is taught to write in every content area, the brain can more easily retrieve the requisite skills to explore, develop, analyze and synthesize information to appropriately express and communicate their knowledge and understanding of a concept.

The teaching of writing can be scary and overwhelming to teachers, especially those in fields other than English/Language Arts. Through on-going training and support, teachers can be made aware of and accept that writing can support their instructional goals. Teachers can: identify their instructional goals, explore strategies to support them, determine ways to meaningfully involve students, ascertain methodologies about how to guide students in their own writing, establish ways to effectively evaluate student writing, and select ways in which to utilize the results of the students' writing.

When establishing a writing assignment some suggestions of things to do might be to:

- share the purpose of the assignment with the students
- explain to students or have them explain to the teacher how the concept/idea relates to their lives
- establish an audience for the writing
- use various strategies to meet the needs of different types of learners
- have students go beyond the facts
- ask the writers to reflect, analyze, synthesize and/or think critically
- utilize the writing process of prewriting, rough draft and final copy
- allow students to work together to peer edit work
- provide regular practice in different styles of writing
- give more opportunities for students to write outside of class
- expect that they will incorporate and integrate information from other content areas
- supply models of different levels of writing to discuss what is and is not strong work

Some ideas to get students writing include:

- writing open ended and essay responses on tests

- brainstorm ideas on a given concept
- argue for or against a topic
- research a particular question, problem or concern
- describe a given process
- express the causes and effects of a concept
- explain and support an issue
- relate information to other content areas
- summarize a concept in their own words
- compare and contrast
- develop and support details of a given idea
- use learning logs for class notes and/or readings
- write out a word problem
- justify a decision
- make predictions

Online Resources:

- Articles on writing across the curriculum-general
An extensive reference list on writing across the curriculum.
<http://www.iub.edu/~cwp/lib/wacgen.shtml>
- Because writing matters
A concise list of characteristics of reasons why writing is important.
<http://www.writingproject.org/pressroom/writingmatters/keypoints.csp>
- National Council Teachers of English
Home site
<http://www.ncte.org/>
- National Writing Project
Home site
<http://www.writingproject.org/>
- Panel says most American students must improve writing to meet the demands of college success and career
A summary of the report *The Neglected "R": The Need for a Writing Revolution*.

http://www.writingcommission.org/pr/pr_4_25_2003.html

- Reading, writing and understanding
In this article, important questions are posed about how teachers can engage students in meaningful writing experiences.
http://www.ascd.org/portal/site/ascd/template.MAXIMIZE/menuitem.459dee008f99653fb85516f762108a0c/?javax.portlet.tpst=d5b9c0fa1a493266805516f762108a0c_ws_MX&javax.portlet.prp_d5b9c0fa1a493266805516f762108a0c_journaltypeheaderimage=%2FASCD%2Fimages%2Fmultifiles%2Fpublications%2Felmast.gif&javax.portlet.prp_d5b9c0fa1a493266805516f762108a0c_viewID=article_view&javax.portlet.prp_d5b9c0fa1a493266805516f762108a0c_journalmoid=4a99ae0fb6eaff00VgnVCM1000003d01a8c0RCRD&javax.portlet.prp_d5b9c0fa1a493266805516f762108a0c_articlemoid=576aae0fb6eaff00VgnVCM1000003d01a8c0RCRD&javax.portlet.prp_d5b9c0fa1a493266805516f762108a0c_journalTypePersonalization=ASCD_EL&javax.portlet.begCacheTok=token&javax.portlet.endCacheTok=token
- Supporting good writing instruction
Two lists are provided on the characteristics of a standard writing assignment and where writing is intentionally taught.
<http://www.writingproject.org/encourage/supporting.csp>
- Writing across the curriculum. Informal writing
A brief, yet rich description of writing across the curriculum along with specific writing examples and types of informational texts, are provided in this article.
<http://www.ncpublicschools.org/docs/curriculum/languagearts/secondary/writingacross.pdf>
- Writing and school reform
This is a report on hearings that were held in 5 different geographical parts of the United States on the nature of writing. This site includes the full report of *The Neglected "R": The Need for a Writing Revolution* on the state of writing in America. It includes recommendations for the inclusion of writing in all content areas.

http://www.writingcommission.org/prod_downloads/writingcom/writing-school-reform-natl-comm-writing.pdf

- Writing: A ticket to work or a ticket out
This is a synthesis of the report of the same title, dealing with issues concerning writing and what people will need in order to be successful after high school.
http://www.writingcommission.org/prod_downloads/writingcom/writing-ticket-to-work.pdf
- Writing to learn, learning to write: Revisiting writing across the curriculum in Northwest secondary schools
A list of statistical information from a report done in 2002 about the state of writing programs in the United States is provided in this piece.
<http://www.nwrel.org/request/2004dec/incontext.html>
- Writing to support achievement in the content areas
Some suggested strategies for ways to incorporate writing in the content areas are provided in this article.
<http://hanlonmath.com/pdfFiles/365.WritinginContentAreas.pdf>

Book

- Differentiated instructional strategies for writing in the content areas
This book offers rich writing strategies to meet the diverse needs of students.
<http://www.corwinpress.com/booksProdDesc.nav?prodId=Book225662>

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