Content Area Writing
Troubleshooting

1. Writing on Demand

Overview

Writing on demand has become one of the more pressing concerns for teachers in recent years. Our students must write on demand for state exams, high school exit exams, and the SAT, ACT, and AP exams, among others. Content area teachers, especially those in science and social studies, require some form of writing, often a short essay, on major exams. Some resist teaching students the strategies they need to succeed on such tests, but this ignores the prevalence and importance of these tests both in school and beyond. Many workplace applications require some writing on demand. Schools that do not demonstrate test proficiency may face being "reconstituted" or otherwise penalized for their performance. What are the problems teachers and students encounter when writing on demand? Here are the most common:
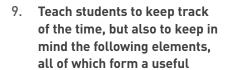
- Analyzing and preparing to write about an assigned, timed prompt.
- Writing about a prompt that is based on a text students must first read.
- Teaching students strategies they can use to write effectively within the constraints of prompts.
- Integrating test preparation into your curriculum without undermining your curriculum and making you feel as though you're teaching to the test.
- Aligning the writing-on-demand prompts with the standards you must address in your class.

Here are instructional techniques you can use to prepare your students for tests without surrendering control of your curriculum:

1. **Analyze and incorporate into your curriculum the language, cognitive demands, and skills found in the writing assessments you, your state, and relevant national tests use.** You could, for example, adapt the language of certain prompts to other assignments, familiarizing students in the process with terms that may appear on the exam. State tests frequently ask students to respond to a text they must read. You might, in anticipation of

this, ask students to write similar assignments that introduce or reinforce those skills, such as generating a word that best describes a particular person they read about, then drawing evidence from the article to support their assertion.

2. **Teach the language and strategies appropriate to the writing assessments your students will encounter in your class and on the SAT, ACT, or AP examinations.** These strategies include annotating the prompt, generating ideas and jotting them down, reading and rereading closely, and taking notes for writing assessments that require the student to first read then write about a text.

3. **Teach students how to break down the prompt of a writing assessment, focusing on the key words that indicate what they must do or include in their essay.** Such instruction might also include teaching them how to organize their essay based on these key words (e.g., comparison/contrast). Often, such prompts can be turned into a checklist of what students must do or include in their essay.

4. **Practice timed writing appropriate to upcoming tests, increasing the time incrementally to match the demands of the test.** In an AP course, for example, students will have to write three essays in two hours, so it makes sense to arrive at May ready to write such demanding essays. In my class, for example, we practice writing analytically in class in 10–15 minute bursts, calling them "mini AP essays" and increasing the time as we get closer to the exams.

5. **Create conditions similar to those on the tests your students will take.** Students in many states, for example, take exit exams that require them to write an essay. In California these tests begin in 10th grade, so whenever possible, teachers of these classes might align their examinations and the scoring guides with those from the state.

6. **Adapt and adopt scoring rubrics from the state or other agency that will be scoring the on-demand writing assessments.** In my AP literature class, for example, I use a rubric I adapted from the one the College Board uses to evaluate the AP exams. Such rubrics are readily available on district, state, and national Web sites.

7. **Use sample papers in conjunction with other available materials such as rubrics and previously used prompts to teach students what to expect on such a test.** To prepare students for the state exit exam, for example, I download from the California State Department of Education's Web site a set of sample student responses to the prompt my students use to practice. Before they score their own, they use the state's rubric to score the sample papers, providing reasons, all of which must be anchored in the rubric, for giving it a score of 3, for instance. They then compare the score they give each paper with those their peers assign, after which I tell them the score the papers actually received. We then generate a list of useful reminders about the traits of effective versus ineffective papers that we refer to regularly on subsequent practice days and prior to the day of the actual test.

8. **Write with your students when they take these practice exams.** Nothing will help you better understand the experience and demands of writing such essays than hacking away at one yourself. I try always to write with my students, at least for part of the time, when they practice for the AP literature exam. I need to be reminded of how stressful it is to read

a poem or other literary text in a few minutes, find something really smart to say about it that I can support with evidence from the text, and say it in a well-written essay in the time allotted. This has the added benefit of giving me—as long as I do a good job!—an example to use and personal experience to refer to.

9. **Teach students to keep track of the time, but also to keep in mind the following elements, all of which form a useful acronym (TRAMP):** What is the **topic**? What are the **requirements**? Who is the **audience**? What rhetorical **mode** should they use when writing this essay? What is their **purpose** (i.e., what are they trying to accomplish) in writing this essay?

10. **Reflect on their performance whenever possible.** While preparing students for the California exit exam, for example, I interrupt them in the middle of writing a practice essay and ask them to write down the strategies they have used and the questions they asked to draft what they've written so far. If they have nothing down, I ask them to explain what is going on in their heads that prevents them from writing. After this brief reflection, I have them resume their essay. More often than not, I notice that they begin writing with a new vigor, as if all their writers' ghosts have been exorcised in that brief period of reflection.

Recommended Readings

Gere, A. R., Christenbury, L., & Sassi, K. (2005). *Writing on demand: Best practices and strategies for success.* Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann.

Angelillo, J. (2005). *Writing to the prompt: When kids don't have a choice.* Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann.

Hillocks, G., Jr. (2002). *The testing trap: How state writing assessments control learning.* New York: Teachers College Press.

2. Teaching the Elements of Effective Writing

> ## Overview
>
> Students need to know not only *how* to write but also *what* to write. Each genre of writing calls for its own special ingredients, some of which are easier to produce than others. In addition to teaching students the conventions of these specific genres, we need to introduce them to and reinforce the basic elements of effective writing in general. Several models have emerged over the years, some more formulaic than others, but all of which have the potential to help students write better expository prose. The following ideas outline the most common problems and offer suggestions for how to begin to address them:
>
> - Identifying the elements of effective expository prose.
>
> - Teaching such elements to students in a way they will understand, remember, and be able to apply them to their own writing.
>
> - Teaching the conventions of various genres my students need to know for my discipline.
>
> - Using these elements to help me assess student writing.
>
> - Obtaining examples to use as models of these different elements and genres of writing.

The following strategies and examples offer a starting point for teaching such elements:

1. **Identify the qualities of effective writing most appropriate to your discipline and the type of writing you have assigned.** In science this would mean creating a list of the elements of an effective field or lab report, some of which might include the following: clear, objective language; appropriate organization of data (e.g., into steps, tables, or graphs); and use of terminology specific to the subject. In a social studies class where students are studying how Americans were persuaded to revolt against England, students would study the elements of argument: claim, reason, evidence, acknowledgment of other perspectives, and response (also referred to as rebuttal), during which they restate their position to clarify their argument. These elements might then be used to analyze samples from that era, such as the writings of Patrick Henry or John Adams. English teachers would do much the same with any type of writing they taught, training students to see and use those elements common to the comparison/contrast essay, the persuasive essay, or the literary analysis paper.

2. **Teach students to recognize, understand, and use those traits of effective writing common to all disciplines and forms.** The most common model, known as the "six traits" (Spandel, 2005; Culham, 2003), argues that good writing has six distinct traits: ideas, sentence fluency, organization, word choice, voice, and conventions. Culham adds to this list "presentation," which she describes as "how the writing looks to the reader" (p. 248).

In my own class, I use the traits and a variation I developed on my own, which we refer to by its rather bland acronym: FODP. Here is a summary of this alternative model:

FOCUS applies to the paper, paragraphs, and sentences. It combines the *subject* and the author's *main point* about the subject.

ORGANIZATION refers to how the writer arranges information throughout the paper and within paragraphs or sentences to achieve a specific effect (e.g., to emphasize).

DEVELOPMENT refers to two elements: details and commentary. *Details* include the examples, evidence, and quotations the author uses to support or illustrate his or her focus. *Commentary* includes analysis, interpretations, insights, opinions, and responses to the question, "So what?"

PURPOSE accounts for the writer's intended effect in the paper as a whole and within each paragraph and sentence.

3. **Include design and format when teaching students the elements of effective writing.** Although neatness has always counted, thanks to computers, it has taken on new meaning and value in our design-savvy world. As mentioned above, Culham includes this in her model, referring to it as "presentation." Because writing is no longer limited to words on a piece of paper, we must take time to teach students how to format pages, screens, or slides, these last two representing important trends in writing: Web pages and presentation slides using programs such as PowerPoint.

4. **Provide direct instruction in the use of mechanical and grammatical conventions, focusing on how these contribute to the clarity and meaning of their writing.** Once you have explicitly taught the specific convention, give students opportunities to practice using it in different contexts so they will develop not only a solid understanding but also fluency in using this knowledge in different but appropriate ways.

5. **Use the specific words you teach them to discuss their writing as you critique it.** Students benefit from a codified language that clarifies what good writing does or includes; such language demystifies effective writing, making it clear that elements can be learned and should be used to write more effectively. In my class, FODP is such an example; when I say "FODP," I often add reflexively, "And what does 'FODP' stand for?" and then ask them to call it out. In a class where instruction focuses on the traits, teachers will use those specific words, often creating posters for each trait to reinforce and add to students' knowledge of each trait.

6. **Reinforce these elements of effective writing by using them, particularly when you have taught one or two recently, as the basis for assessment.** Any rubric or other means of scoring students' work would include the specific element(s), such as "Development: Includes a range of appropriate examples, quotations, and data; explains through commentary what these examples mean and how they relate to the main idea you are developing." By giving students such guidelines ahead of time, you reinforce the importance of that element both for writing in general and this assignment in particular.

7. **Train students to identify the use or omission of those elements essential to a particular genre of writing.** Whether this means mechanical conventions such as properly citing a source or more structural conventions such as using transition words to organize the information, you can develop students' eyes through direct instruction in these areas. If I have been teaching students to integrate quotations into their writing, for example, I will have them use highlighters to identify all the quotations in their paper. Following this initial phase of identification, we then review and apply what I have taught them about introducing and commenting on the quotation. I typically use some means of identifying— labeling, highlighting, circling, underlining—when teaching students to use such elements.

8. **Teach specific elements of writing using a three-phase approach: explicit instruction, guided practice, and, finally, application.** If, for example, you want to teach students how to use correlative conjunctions (not only *x* but also *y*), prepare a lesson that explains in detail what they are, why students should use them, and how to use them. Include in this first stage a range of examples that show the conjunctions used in different contexts as well as in the type of paper you are asking them to write. Next provide students with samples taken from publishers, produced by past students, or created by you. You might begin by projecting a few sentences on a screen and asking students to combine them using correlative conjunctions. Finally, when they show some fluency, require them to use these correlative conjunctions in the papers they are writing. The same sequence applies when teaching other aspects of writing, such as thesis statements, types of paragraphs, or elements of argument.

9. **Show these elements used in context by effective writers.** These examples can come from professional writers, your students, or you. They should not be intimidating but rather well suited to the level of your students and the context of the assignment. If, for example, an American Literature teacher is teaching elements of rhetoric in the context of persuasion, she might use appropriate examples from a speech by Abraham Lincoln, asking students to mimic his tone and rhetorical strategies. I have a folder in my office at home where I toss examples I find in magazines and other publications; at school I have a tray for student examples. It is useful to have models that are both effective and ineffective so students can see the difference that it makes to use, for example, transitional phrases at the beginning of a sentence. When possible, I present these models using my LCD projector so I can color-code the elements of the writing I want them to study. As we examine these elements, I think aloud about what is going on in the text and how the writer achieved that effect.

10. **Reinforce the use of these elements throughout the year by using the same words, requiring these elements be included, and teaching students to use them at more advanced levels.** It is too easy, given all that we must teach in the course of a year, to do "drive-by teaching," which means we teach it in October and never talk about it again. "Been there, done that!" we think, mentally checking off another standard on the long list of demands we all face. Effective writing instruction, however, requires that such lessons be taught in depth, revisited, and refined over the entire year. While we may teach them well in October, the writing we expect from students as the year unfolds should necessarily be more complex and require guided support as to how to use those same elements students

learned for October's narrative essay on April's analytical paper. One way to keep these terms and techniques in play throughout the year is to keep them posted in key places on the walls of your room as reminders—both to students and yourself!

Recommended Readings

Spandel, V. (2009). *Creating writers through 6-trait writing assessment and instruction* (5th ed.). Boston: Allyn & Bacon.

Culham, R. (2003). *6 + 1 traits of writing: The complete guide, grades 3 and up.* New York: Scholastic.

Portalupi, J., & Fletcher, R. (2004). *Teaching the qualities of writing.* Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann.

3. Using Computers to Improve Writing

Overview

Students write constantly these days in ways they never did in the past; e-mails, text messages, blogs, social networking Web sites, and wikis all provide students ways to express their ideas to friends or even a large public (if they are lucky enough to come up with a hot blog idea). Whereas students in the pre-computer age were unlikely to have the keyboard skills needed to type efficiently, today most kids can hammer away thanks to those all-night instant messaging conversations they have or those MySpace exchanges they enjoyed all weekend. The point is that most students now come into the class ready to use computers (at least at the secondary level), but that we must use these machines in ways that improve students' writing skills and yield better writing in a range of genres. Here are some of the concerns related to the use of computers in the classroom:

- Identifying the skills students need to use computers effectively.
- Deciding which applications students should learn to use.
- Defining the teacher's role in the classroom when students are all working on computers.
- Figuring out how the teacher can use a computer to enhance writing instruction.
- Making room for other computer-mediated learning to improve writing.

The following suggestions offer guidance in how to use computers to help students write better:

1. **Teach students to use a variety of software applications and online programs for different purposes.** Given that each application is a solution to a different composing or instructional problem, you want to be sure students know how to use Microsoft Word, PowerPoint, and, in some cases, more specialized software like Inspiration, an idea-generating program that allows students to organize their thoughts in different formats. In addition to these applications, students should all learn how to use e-mail, post to blogs, and contribute to wikis. As for other, more familiar forms of social writing such as instant messaging and text messaging, well, we would be better off asking students to teach *us* those lessons, as they are the experts in such writing.

2. **Consider using commercial writing programs if these seem appropriate solutions for your school or students.** Recent increases on the NAEP writing test suggest that some schools used these programs to great effect. Such programs as Vantage Learning's MY Access!, Pearson Education's WriteToLearn, and Teaching Matters's Writing Matters provide useful guidance through the writing process, also allowing students to receive almost immediate feedback when they submit it online to a software program that analyzes the features of the text. Although these programs are not appealing to all (I don't use any of them), many schools are looking to computers for solutions, asking whether they can help students write better. Initial results suggest that they do have a positive impact on writing if used well.

3. **Use computers to generate and organize ideas in the prewriting stage of the process.** Students often find they can write more and faster on computers, freed up from the initial concern about making mistakes and, often, able to write faster on a keyboard than they can with a paper and pencil. On computers connected to the Internet, students can move between applications, investigating resources and reading for ideas, then jotting down these ideas and responding to them by way of figuring out what they want to say on the paper they must write. Other, more specialized applications can further facilitate the generating process: the outlining function in word processing programs or similar capabilities in programs like Inspiration that allow students to create mind maps that, with a keystroke, can become outlines students can continue to manipulate as they explore different possible connections and arrangements.

4. **Incorporate word processing into your writing curriculum whenever possible, as research shows this strategy benefits all writers but especially underachieving writers.** Whether on laptops in the classroom or on desktop computers in a computer lab, students write more and show a greater willingness to revise and experiment than students doing the same assignment with paper and pencil. Other factors that strengthen the effect of using word processors include the increased confidence from spell checker and the appearance of their papers, which now look like those of the smartest kid in the class. Of course, not everyone has access to a full lab. Students can collaborate on certain types of papers and still get the same benefits; as the authors of *Writing Next: Effective Strategies to Improve Writing of Adolescents in Middle and High*

Schools say, "In this type of instruction, students might work collaboratively on writing assignments" (Graham & Perin, 2007).

5. **Teach students the skills they need to use the computer and software.** While your primary objective is to improve student writing, everything we do provides "teachable moments" for secondary objectives such as, in this case, teaching them how to use Microsoft Word or, if they already know that, how to integrate graphics and tables into their word processing documents, for example. I often use my laptop connected to the LCD projector to provide such instruction if it is for everyone. When, for example, I want to teach students how to put headers and insert page numbers into their papers, I walk them through this step by step, pausing as I pull down the "View" menu and show them the "Header and Footer" option. When we move into the computer lab, I circulate among the students, seeing that they have successfully included the header and page numbers. If they have not mastered it, I sit down and provide instruction for them at that time, first doing it for them, then erasing and asking them to do it themselves. Although word processing is the primary use of computers, other lessons require similar instruction: posting to a blog, composing and sending e-mail, creating Web pages, formatting and writing for PowerPoint slides (e.g., writing with bullets).

6. **Use the computer to demonstrate certain aspects of writing you are teaching or to provide models for students.** For example when my students wrote a short paper synthesizing their thinking about the "stages of life," I powered up the projector and wrote on the laptop (in PowerPoint), "Although everyone's life takes its own unique path, our lives fall into four distinct stages." This was, I explained, just a working topic sentence for the assignment, which amounted to a long paragraph. I stopped, discussed what I had written and what I was trying to accomplish, and then directed them either to write my sentence or come up with their own that achieved the same purpose. Next, I wrote the transitional sentence for the first of the four stages: "The first stage is when one…." Several points merit attention here. I was getting the information from one of the students in the class, using his model and its content as the basis for my paragraph. Although the class did not know it, I was asking this student for information because I knew that he had a good model from the previous day's work in his group but also that he had a hard time with writing. So by using his material to guide my demonstration, I was embedding some invisible differentiation and targeted support (which paid off when he wrote well). They could not copy my exact words, only use them as a guide for their own writing. I went on a bit further, narrating my actions all along, and then turned them loose to write their own with paper and pencil in class. Such modeling is especially valuable when students are writing specialized genres with required conventions. Science teachers who want well-written lab reports, for example, should provide such examples and explanations if they want strong performances.

7. **Integrate other computer-mediated communication into your curriculum so students can use writing to learn and think about the content of your course.** Examples of such communication include blogs, wikis, e-mail conversations—even text messaging in class about the books they are reading or ideas they are studying.

I know—this is heresy! And I realize not all students have cell phones. Still, I have talked with some teachers who, in a moment of spontaneity, told kids to break out their phones and do above their desk what they are always trying to do under it: write! Others have experimented successfully with having kids use IM (instant messenger) as an alternative to book groups or literature circles. I have enjoyed consistent success in using threaded discussions to explore an idea as background knowledge prior to reading about it or a topic they have chosen to examine throughout a book. In my senior English class, for example, students reading *Crime and Punishment* chose from among eight subjects (e.g., choices, psychology, philosophy, faith) the one they wanted to focus on as they read the novel. Weekly, they went online and posted comments about the book and others' responses. I found that this informal academic writing yielded much more developed responses than their typical notebook entries because it was more social and students are more fluent on computers. Also, those who are shy in class or need additional time to process the material are often the best contributors to these threaded discussions because they can take their time to formulate a response after reading what others have to say. Teachers of other subjects have had similar success using writing in these ways. A social studies teacher, for example, began a unit on World War II by asking students to respond over the course of a week to the question, "Is there such a thing as a just war?"

8. **Design smart documents to improve student writing.** By "smart" I mean documents that include annotations and other details designed to help students do well. When teaching students to write a formal letter, for example, I created a model that showed not only the appropriate tone but also the proper format.

9. **Teach students to write for a range of technology-based genres, as these all have their own conventions that, although still evolving, will be essential to their success in the world beyond school.** PowerPoint, for example, requires learning how to say much in few words. Moreover, PowerPoint slides require careful attention not only to word choice (every word counts when you only get three bullets on a slide!) but to parallel structure as well. This creates a useful opportunity and authentic context in which to teach them what parallel structure is and why it matters. Students creating a web page, on the other hand, need to learn other ways of writing suited to their purpose and audience. Again, tone and format matter, as do correctness and content.

10. **Be sensitive to the reality that no matter where you teach, there are students who do not have access to computers at home for one reason or another.** This is certainly more of a problem in some schools than in others. My son attends a large urban public high school and has never been to a computer lab; if asked whether there is a computer lab, he says with typical teenage indifference, "How would I know?" In my own class, I always have students who face this limitation. They know they can come in and use my classroom computers (two outdated but serviceable Macs) or those in the library before and after school and during lunch. If I want to make sure everyone gets on and gets it done, especially if I want to teach them something about writing or using a program, I will sign up for the computer lab and hope everything works and that, at period's end, we

have paper when we print! Unfortunately, this often is not the case, something that serves to remind me that while computers offer great benefit to us, they can also cost us precious instructional time (if the printer is down, the Internet isn't working that day, or we can't get a computer for everyone due to the number of machines that are out of commission).

Recommended Readings

Pew Internet and American Life Project. (2008, April). *Writing, Technology and Teens.* Available at www.pewinternet.org.

Partnership for 21st Century Skills. www.21stcenturyskills.org/

4. Handling the Paper Load

Overview

The old saying is that if we had students write as much as we should, we could never grade it all, and if we assigned only what we could grade, they would not write enough. When it comes to handling the paper load, these are the most common issues for us:

- Keeping up with the volume of papers.
- Providing useful feedback that improves students' writing.
- Returning papers in a timely manner with helpful feedback.
- Reducing the number of papers or time spent responding to them while still providing quality writing instruction.

Here are a few general ways to respond to or follow up with student writing:

1. **Comment on instead of correcting their papers, focusing on what they do well and what they can do to improve.** Say, for example, "Good examples here. Consider explaining a bit more how they relate to your main idea."

2. **Use scoring guides and rubrics when you don't have time to respond to papers but want to offer specific feedback about what they did well and need to improve next time.** These have the added advantage of telling students in advance what their grade will be based on as well as communicating why they received the grade they did. You can also have students take one aspect of the rubric (e.g., uses examples, quotations, or commentary to develop an argument) and analyze their papers just for that one feature, highlighting examples of these elements.

3. **Set up and teach students how to do collaborative or group scoring on assignments (usually with a rubric).** One warning, however: You must still go over the work to make sure the grades reflect the quality of the work. Often teachers who use such scoring will return the papers to the students for another round of revision once the student knows (roughly) what it would earn and where it could be improved.

4. **Confer with students in class or after school for more responsive feedback and to allow for a different mode of responding.** Such conferences allow for individualized feedback and a more supportive atmosphere in which to discuss students' writing.

5. **Cull examples from representative papers and teach (via overhead projector) to these papers.** For example instead of commenting on all the papers, I will pull out a few papers—usually a C, B, and an A paper—and copy parts of them to overhead transparencies. I put these up in order from proficient (C) to excellent (A) and do a think-aloud about what they each do well and could do better, using the higher example to illustrate what the previous level could have done better. This leaves me more time to focus on what and *how* to teach the next day instead of marking up 70 papers that night.

    Noah Berger

6. **Effective feedback is:**

    - Clearly worded in a way that guides revision (e.g., a well-phrased question that suggests what the student can do without doing the thinking for them).

    - Based on instruction and qualities of effective writing—*not* on a teacher's stylistic preferences.

    - Anchored in specific criteria or lessons taught in class. For example, if you have been teaching students to incorporate quotations and add commentary on those quotations, those are features you should focus on.

    - Positive but productive; personal but useful: "Great verbs, Charlene! They really add strength to your description. Consider working on the subjects to make them a bit more concrete."

    - Limited to a few specific items. I will often list three bullets at the top for the student to focus on; this has the added advantage of giving me a cue if we meet to discuss the paper. If I see "Development, passive verbs, and citations" at the top, I know what to talk about.

Recommended Reading

Jago, C. (2005). *Papers, papers, papers: An English teacher's survival guide.* Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann.

5. Supporting Struggling Writers

Overview

At one time or another, nearly all students struggle to write, regardless of their skill level. Top students in my Advanced Placement class find themselves shutting down as they begin to write a demanding essay on a complex novel or a timed essay about a challenging poem they don't understand. Similarly, students in any other class, regardless of subject area, struggle to get ideas down or draw them out when they cannot find the language. Students with learning difficulties (LD) or English learners (ELs) struggle for similar and different reasons. They lack the language or cannot find ways to get their ideas out and onto the page. For one reason or another, writing is simply a torturous process for these students unless they find strategies they can use and have teachers who try to meet their needs through instructional accommodations. The most common issues associated with supporting struggling writers include these:

- Finding and using strategies that help them generate ideas and revise.
- Helping students write with greater fluency and confidence.
- Teaching these students strategies for different types of writing.
- Giving them techniques to correct their errors.
- Being effective when teaching such a range of students in one class.

Whole books are written about this subject, but here are the key recommendations I have found from reading many books and reports about this subject:

1. **Provide accommodations when possible (or mandated) to help students compose.** Such accommodations include extended time (for timed writing or stages of the writing process), use of computers, and dictation. This last is the most demanding, but research shows it has the greatest effect in helping LD students write at or near the level of their non-LD peers. While dictation continues, for the most part, to mean orally composing with a partner or adult aide, technology (e.g., voice recognition software) will make this a valid choice for any student in the near future, which will raise the interesting question of what it will even mean to "write" when one can do so just as easily by using his or her voice to compose. It's also worth noting that many of the great authors, including John Cheever and Fyodor Dostoevsky, frequently hired secretaries or used recorders to take down what they composed orally.

2. **Offer language support appropriate to the genre or style of writing.** Academic writing is foreign to most students and thus requires the use of prompts, language, and models. Prompts typically include sentence starters (e.g., The author argues that _____ is best because _____.) to train students in the use of such academic forms. Teachers might find it useful to create a handout of such starters or put them on poster paper. Language support, on the other hand, translates to words, often specialized words appropriate to a content area. In an English class, for example, this might mean a list of words kids can use to describe a character, an author's tone, or the story's mood. Finally, models offer the most

complete support, giving students concrete examples of what a given type of sentence, paragraph, or paper looks like in your class. While some might say that such complete examples give away the keys to the kingdom—"Why not just write the essay for them?!" such people might ask—the truth is that such students are grateful for the support and are more willing to do what you assign now that they know what they should do. I will typically tell students that they cannot use my language but can adapt my organization to give them ideas for their own writing. Many *great* writers learned their craft by literally retyping—transcribing—the classic works in their field to learn how the masters achieved such excellence.

3. **Allow multiple entry points into the writing.** This means giving kids time to talk, draw, read, or perform first what they must eventually translate into words on the page. When teaching persuasive writing, for example, consider having students prepare for and engage in a debate, the structure and evidence of which will serve as the basis for the subsequent essay they will write. The debates will serve as a rehearsal, an oral draft of the paper they will write. Moreover, their debate partners and other classmates, who went through the same process, will be ideally prepared to offer support during the composing and revising process, giving writers examples they forgot to include in their essay.

4. **Use graphic organizers and other tools to help students generate and organize their ideas during the writing process.** Such tools can be especially useful when students must take notes on a text that serves as the basis for the paper they must write. A Venn diagram, for example, allows students to take structured notes while reading two articles about the same subject. When they move into writing, their comparison and contrast details are all set to go, and students can complete the writing assignment with greater confidence than if left alone.

5. **Ask students to reflect on their use of these different strategies and tools to find those that help them most.** Each student is, of course, different, and must determine whether talking with others or making outlines, using a computer or studying a model provides the most useful support for more independent writing. I routinely ask students at the end of a paper to write a reflection on what strategy helped them most. On a recent paper, freshmen students said using computers and the annotated example I provided made the biggest difference because, as one said, "I had a hard time understanding what you wanted until I saw the example you gave us."

6. **Provide explicit instruction in those areas of greatest need to struggling writers.** With ELs, this might mean a focused session on the side about a particular genre that's already familiar to native speakers. On another occasion it might mean teaching a mini-lesson to a class or group within that class on some aspect of the writing assignment—use of transitions, for example, when contrasting—that is new to them or one they find challenging.

7. **Try structured writing formats that guide students, with varying degrees of support, through the genre you are teaching.** Harris, Graham, and Mason (2002) describe, for example, such a format for teaching persuasive writing, calling it the TREE method. In this

method the elements of argument are represented by each letter: "(1) **T**opic sentence—tell what you believe; (2) **R**easons (several)—Why do you believe this? Will your readers believe this?; (3) **E**xplain reasons—say more about each reason; (4) **E**nding—wrap it up right" (Graham, MacArthur, & Fitzgerald, 2007, p. 301).

8. **Focus on the reading–writing connection.** Because students often write about texts they read, the problems they have with the writing may actually stem from their difficulty with the reading. After all, you cannot write well about a subject or text you do not understand. To address knowledge gaps, you might have students take notes, discuss, or complete some graphic organizer, to give some order to their understanding of the assigned text before trying to write about it. In general, when students struggle to write, the question we should always ask is *what are the possible causes of their difficulty*. While disabilities or lack of background knowledge on the subject or genre may be the cause, it is often the case that reading was the problem. The lesson is that we cannot expect students to learn or perform well if we do not give them the support and time they need to do one step well (read) that serves as the basis for the next step (write).

9. **Have students talk throughout the composing process.** Students are much more adept at discussing their ideas and, after hearing others', can glean new ideas for their own papers. Much of the research I read about students with learning difficulties and English learners stresses the value of peer response at different stages.

10. **Develop and improve students' writing fluency through frequent writing in notebooks, journals, daybooks—whatever you call them in your class.** Such writing is most beneficial, however, when it is structured, purposeful, and related to the more formal academic writing you are trying to teach them to do. This means instead of saying, "Just write for five minutes about whatever comes to mind about relationships," you perhaps begin by asking them to generate a list of types of relationships and examples of each. Then, once they are prepared and the task is clearly conveyed (through a written prompt on the board), you ask them to write a paragraph for the next ten minutes that begins with a topic sentence about the types of relationships and goes from there, using the examples they generated in the brief but useful prewriting session.

Recommended Reading

Graham, S., & Harris, K. R. (2005). *Writing better: Effective strategies for teaching students with learning difficulties*. Baltimore, MD: Brooks.

Graham, S., MacArthur, C. A., & Fitzgerald, J. (eds). (2007). *Best practices in writing instruction*. New York: Guilford.

Harris, K. R., Graham, S, & Mason, L. (2002). POW plus TREE equals powerful opinion essays. *Teaching Exceptional Children*, 34(5), 74–77.

This book has focused on academic writing and, within that, primarily expository writing in the form of the essay, because this is the primary form used in classes and on state assessments. Yet there are other important areas of academic writing that pose challenges. These other forms are addressed in the second half of the troubleshooting section in order to help you use these other forms of writing to learn.

6. Summarizing

What It Is

Summarizing is an essential skill for both readers and writers in any discipline. Writing good summaries is not easy, something teachers don't always realize, perhaps because we have done it for so long and have so thoroughly internalized the necessary skills that we can't imagine its being hard to do. Yet to write an effective summary one must be able to evaluate the importance of information, comprehend often complex ideas well enough to translate them into our own words, and then actually write the summary in succinct, clear language. Let's be more specific. A great summary should do the following:

- Focus on the main idea of the text and include only the most important details from the original source.

- Offer a *brief* retelling of the text (e.g., article, chapter, book, movie) in your own words.

- Be shorter than the text you are summarizing.

- Emphasize and explain the meaning of the main idea and supporting details.

- Organize the content of your summary in the same order as those details appear in the source.

- Offer no analysis or commentary.

- Include quotations from or cite the original text if necessary.

- Avoid plagiarism by ensuring that you use your own words; this does not mean mimicking the original sentence structure and changing *important* to *significant*. The author of the original text should feel that you accurately represented his text but be unable to recognize it as his own writing.

When to Summarize

Content area teachers can—and should—ask students to summarize throughout the year for a range of reasons and with a variety of types of text. These "texts" would include not only written but also spoken and visual texts, as well as media texts and events such as an experiment or process, the results of which you must convey in writing or through a presentation. All fields include summaries—often called a "synopsis"—in research articles, reinforcing the value of this

skill, which also doubles as a reading strategy. After teaching students *how* to summarize, ask students to summarize for the following purposes:

- To assess their understanding of what they read.

- To help them understand a particularly challenging article that may have many specialized terms.

- To incorporate ideas from other sources into a paper they are writing.

- To evaluate and identify the main idea and supporting details in a challenging text.

- To incorporate key ideas from other texts and sources into a PowerPoint presentation, using bullets instead of prose to summarize.

Questions to Ask

- What is the subject of the text you are summarizing?

- Why are you writing a summary of this text?

- What are the most important ideas in this text you are summarizing?

- How should you organize the content of your summary?

- Have you evaluated your summary for any analysis or commentary?

How to Teach Summarizing

You can't teach summarizing in one period and turn them loose for the rest of the year. Each subject area has its own conventions and types of texts, all of which get more complex as the year unfolds. Thus the English teacher who wanted students to summarize the article in October must teach this skill not only in October but again in April when students read Shakespeare and will use it to understand certain difficult passages in the play. The following steps offer suggestions as to how you could teach students to write a summary:

- Teach them how to identify the main idea of the text. I prefer to have kids use either a highlighter or a graphic organizer, since these allow them to be more active readers. Depending on students' degrees of readiness, I might ask them to preview the article and its title and then generate possible subjects, which I will write on the board. After discussing these possible subjects in light of our purpose, we will determine what the subject of the summary should be. For example if my freshmen read a passage in their textbook from Jon Krakauer's *Into Thin Air*, we might conclude that the main subject is the human need to conquer nature.

- Have students read the text, highlighting or underlining the key ideas related to the main subject. Some students need extra help in determining the importance of information. In such cases, I often create a "Continuum of Importance" on the board, writing "Essential" at one end and "Irrelevant" at the other. Then we talk about what kind of information in an article like Krakauer's might be irrelevant and how we could determine that. This doesn't have to take a long time, but it is extremely important as students need to learn which questions to ask in order to evaluate the importance

of information. If it is a difficult article or I am working with students who have not done this before, we will stop after the first couple of paragraphs and discuss as a class what people have underlined. As we do so, I will ask of a particular detail, "How does that meet our criteria for 'Essential'?" If I am introducing summarizing for the first time to an inexperienced class with diverse needs, I will do a think-aloud, walking them through the first paragraph and modeling on the overhead what I would underline, then explaining *why* I would underline that. Next I would have them do a paragraph or two, after which I would check through discussion how they did, clarifying if necessary when they are off the mark. Once they show reasonable competency, I would let them go, circulating around the room to monitor their performance as they work.

- Chunk the text into the key details or events (three or four in an article like Krakauer's). Students might do this collaboratively, taking time to compare their key details with each other as a secondary assessment of their reading. Then discuss as a class what they thought the important details were.

- Develop a thesis or a topic sentence that establishes the subject of your summary and the point you will make about it. In the Krakauer article, such a statement, which we could develop as a class if this were all new to them, might read, "In his article, 'Into Thin Air,' Jon Krakauer suggests that we have a need to conquer nature and, in the process, sometimes end up conquering ourselves instead."

- Provide a model of what a complete summary looks like at this point. I project a summary on the whiteboard when possible, labeling the different elements, doing a think-aloud about it as I go so students get a sense of what a complete summary looks and sounds like. We will revisit the elements of an effective summary—as outlined in our text, on a handout I created, or on the board up front—and find these elements in the example. In an ideal world, I would have a checklist I created for them which would be adapted from the "What It Is" section above, which they can use as they go for self-evaluation.

- Have students write their summaries using the guidelines for assistance.

- Ask them to label the different elements to show that they have included them and know where they are.

- Take the summaries home, respond to them, and then return them to the students so they can use my comments to guide their revision

- Show a couple of good rough drafts on the overhead—or even as handouts for students to take home for additional help—since these are examples of the very assignment they are doing.

- Send students home with my comments, the example, and a night to revise.

- Collect, read, and score.

- Debrief with them on the elements, using an example of a student who did a fine job, preferably a student who has not had attention or even feels he is a "bad writer" but did a commendable job on this. This kind of support throughout the process allows struggling writers to succeed and merit such attention.

7. Paraphrasing

What It Is

Although it's a cousin to the summary, a paraphrase is different in some important ways and is used for different purposes much of the time. In short, a paraphrase is more detailed than a summary. An effective paraphrase does the following:

- Captures the essence of and includes the entire message of the text being paraphrased.

- Is approximately as long as the text it paraphrases.

- Sounds nothing like the original; is entirely in your own words and writing style.

- Offers no commentary, analysis, or explanation of any content in the text.

- Includes all of the main points of a passage in the order in which they appear.

- Avoids plagiarism by using your own words and sentence structures as opposed to merely replacing the original text's with synonyms; also, by clearly citing the source of the text to avoid the appearance that these are your ideas.

- Uses quotation marks to indicate that a memorable passage comes from the original text.

- Cites the page number from the original text if you include the paraphrase in your own text as an example or support for a point you are trying to make.

- Paraphrases only a short passage since it should be as long as or, in some cases, even a bit longer than the original.

When to Paraphrase

Paraphrasing is appropriate and effective when you want to do any of the following:

- Understand a passage that is very difficult (e.g., think of something like Hamlet's soliloquy, a dense scientific theory, or even certain constitutional amendments).

- Emphasize key ideas from an original text without using the author's original language, for reasons of clarity or style.

- Include in your paper ideas from other texts that you can convey more effectively or gracefully than the original author.

- Assess students' understanding of a text they are reading.

Questions to Ask

- What is the subject of this passage you are paraphrasing?

- Why are you paraphrasing this specific passage?

- How will you incorporate this paraphrase into your paper?

- Is your paraphrase as long as the text you are paraphrasing?

- If the author read this, would he or she recognize the writing or compliment you on how well you reworded it?

How to Teach Paraphrasing

Paraphrasing requires direct instruction and the opportunity to practice the skills, as it must be done just right to be effective and to avoid charges of plagiarism. To teach it, try the following steps:

- Teach students to identify when it is appropriate to paraphrase a passage. While it is most commonly used in the context of writing a paper, it is just as viable as a reading strategy when students are completely stumped by a difficult passage.

- Show students how to read a passage closely, identifying the main idea and supporting details that will have to be included in the paraphrase. You could do this by providing a structured note-taking handout, using a graphic organizer, or asking students to color-code (with highlighters or crayons) the main idea and supporting details.

- Ask students to review the text before writing, checking their notes against what they read to be sure they have included all the key details related to the main idea.

- Provide students with an example of a good paraphrase, going over it with them to identify the key details included in the sample paraphrase.

- Have students write a draft paraphrase, using a checklist you create based on the list (above) that details what a paraphrase should do.

- Offer constructive, specific feedback and then return the papers to students so they can revise.

- Require students to revise their paraphrases and resubmit for grading.

8. Synthesizing Multiple Sources

What It Is

Both summarizing and paraphrasing ask students to retell what someone has already said; however, neither of these requires any analytical thinking. Although many disciplines require the ability to summarize and paraphrase, these skills are not enough. Students must be able to make from separate, seemingly unrelated sources, a new text of their own creation. This is where new thinking and new connections yield great discoveries and advances in all fields. Synthesizing is more demanding, though, and requires strong support in the early stages. A powerful synthesis paper will accomplish the following:

- Examine and respond to more than one source in the same or different media. For example, in examining the idea of voting for the latest elections, students in an American history or government class would not only examine original documents from the constitutional era but also go to different Web sites and blogs and analyze media coverage from different television stations, while also checking out other media such as candidates' advertisements. Additional sources might include film, art, podcasts, informational graphics such as charts, as well as lectures or experiments conducted in class.

- Identify and discuss the relationship between these different sources and the subject you are examining.

- Evaluate the validity and importance of the source in light of the current purpose and topic.

- Summarize each source prior to establishing its relationship to the others and the overarching subject you are examining.

- Analyze the similarities and differences, causes, and effects common to these different sources, identifying key points they have in common and explaining the meaning and importance of these.

- Organize the ideas so as to clarify the connections and emphasize the points you want to make about the subject common to these different sources.

- Have a specific purpose: to explain or to persuade.

Questions to Ask

- What patterns, trends, or categories emerge as you synthesize these different sources or data?

- How does each source relate to the others and to the main subject you are examining?

- What are some of the key similarities and differences, and why are these important?

- Which sources offer the strongest evidence for the point you are trying to make in your synthesis?

- Based on your understanding of these different texts, what conclusion can you draw about your main subject?

When to Synthesize

All the main content-area subjects require students to synthesize. Science classes ask students to conduct experiments that generate datasets or results that must be synthesized so students can make inferences about causes and effects. Social studies classes, especially Advanced Placement United States history, teach students to read a range of primary and secondary sources and draw conclusions about what led to, for example, the Civil War, and what accounts for its enduring effect on American society. Health teachers routinely invite students to analyze competing claims about different diets, foods, or habits, drawing on a range of sources, including those funded by the companies that sell the products. Finally, English teachers regularly ask students to synthesize a range of perspectives on a given literary text or use a range of texts in different media to examine a subject such as the American Dream. These are all examples of *who* uses synthesis in their classes, but *when* should you ask students to synthesize? Here are some possibilities:

- Incorporate multiple sources into an essay in which the students are examining a subject from different perspectives. This might mean asking students to write a paper in which they "cite at least two different Web sites, three articles from different publications or authors, an interview, and the book you are reading in class."

- Include different perspectives on a given subject or text, all synthesized into one paper. In an English class this might mean asking students to consult different literary theories to find alternative readings of a literary text such as *Hamlet* or *The Grapes of Wrath* and incorporate these competing perspectives in one paper, comparing and contrasting the different theories in light of the claim they are defending.

- Integrate multiple sources into a research paper or by way of preparing for an exam such as the Advanced Placement U.S. history or language and composition exam, both of which require students to write a synthesis paper based on a collection of five or six different texts (e.g., editorials, charts, photos, letters, journals, articles).

- Evaluate students' understanding of these different texts as a culminating short writing assignment in which they are asked to write a paragraph or page that summarizes and synthesizes the different ideas they have examined in the course of a unit or during a Socratic seminar.

How to Teach Synthesis

- Ask students to establish a clear purpose in light of the prompt, subject, or the collection of texts you have given them. It is often helpful to teach students to create a purpose question that will allow them to evaluate the different information they encounter in the text.

- Show students how to read the different texts carefully, taking notes as they go, preferably with a specific technique or tool you have chosen for them to use in light of their purpose.

- Require students to summarize the different texts as part of their notes prior to creating a claim the different sources will support.

- Take time to have students develop a claim in light of their purpose. It is always helpful for you to take time at this stage to guide them, offering examples and feedback on their claim, and asking them how that relates to the different sources they have read, heard, or viewed.

- Encourage students to make an outline, even if just an informal one, to establish the organizational strategy for their paper. Part of this process involves asking them to evaluate what details are most important and what their relationship is to each other. For example, are some details more important than others? If so, should they come first, or should the paper build up to them as the culmination of the argument?

- Provide students time to talk with each other about their ideas, their sources, and how these fit together. All the reading and prewriting has prepared them to participate in an intelligent discussion that will inevitably generate new connections and insights.

- Teach students how to document and cite all sources according to the proper format.

- Give them time to write the synthesis, whether a paragraph, a page, or a paper.

- Offer students feedback through your own comments or those of peer responders before giving students the chance to revise, polish, and submit.

- Allow students to present their synthesis if they are doing it as a documentary video, Web site, or PowerPoint presentation.

9. Responding Critically

What It Is

This sort of writing comes in many forms: the learning log, the reader's notebook, the dialogue journal, or an actual paper that takes a critical stance on a subject, a text, an event, experience, or experimental results. Such critical responses, regardless of their form, will invariably include or be shaped by these components:

- A specific purpose defined most often by the teacher (you).

- A particular format: dialogue journals will be divided into two columns; learning logs will go in a notebook as entries with no particular layout; a paper may have specific requirements for what to critically respond to.

- Criteria for their analysis, such as examining the Supreme Court decision in light of the Second Amendment, or a poet's treatment of the subject of identity in her poems.

- Summaries of key ideas in the text to demonstrate initial understanding.

- Possible questions to help students think critically about the subject at hand or the text to which they are responding.

- Identification of key elements of the text, which may include language, structure, themes, evidence, or more specific literary aspects such as imagery, tone, or symbolism.

- A statement of the author's purpose or argument and the means by which he or she tries to accomplish it.

- An evaluation of the text for any flaws or fallacies in its argument.

Questions to Ask

- What is the subject of this text?

- What is the author's purpose?

- How does the author go about trying to achieve this purpose?

- Is the author's evidence reliable, current, and valid?

- What strategies and possible logical fallacies has the author used in support of his argument?

When to Respond Critically

All classes include texts that should be examined critically. Whether these texts are solutions to problems, datasets, arguments, or works of literature, they are constructions that merit close scrutiny. Consider asking students to respond critically when you want them to do the following:

- Analyze how a text is constructed.

- Evaluate the assumptions behind a particular argument, explanation, or analysis.

- Critique a work of art or literature.

- Make inferences about an advertisement or other media text.

- Draw conclusions based on data from an experiment or demographic trend.

- Examine historical movements or events.

How to Teach It

Although the approach may vary a bit, you can adapt the following suggestions as appropriate to your instructional goals and students' needs:

- Ask students to indicate the text, source, and date for each response.

- Establish clear criteria for what it should include.

- Help them generate questions they can use to evaluate and respond to the text.

- Suggest they use bullets to summarize key ideas or elements.

- Provide students a model, creating one on the spot while thinking aloud, if necessary.

- Allow students to collaborate or consult with each other throughout the process, comparing their ideas as a means of generating new ideas for each other.

- Use these responses not as an end but a means for further discussion or preparation for subsequent, more complete writing assignments on this subject.

10. Reflecting on and Through Writing

What It Is

Throughout this guide I have discussed how we can teach students to write well; this last suggestion focuses on how to use writing to improve not only students' writing performance but also their reading comprehension. Studies of learning consistently find that for learning to occur and sustain itself, students require time to reflect on what they did during the writing or reading process to arrive at their final result. In short, such reflection makes students more aware of the decisions they made on the way to their final draft or interpretation. To reflect on or through writing, students can do one or a combination of the following:

- Take time to reflect on their past performances and current focus areas in writing and reading to help them pay attention to what they do well and what they need to work on.

- Pause during the writing or reading of a text to reflect on what they think and why they think it, focusing in part on the strategies they are using and their effectiveness in this particular assignment. In addition, students should focus on *how* these strategies are helping them so they can be more intentional and habitual in their use in the future.

- Take time after students finish writing or reading to reflect on their performance, stressing what they did well and what they need to improve on. The purpose of such metacognitive reflection is to ensure that successful performances can be repeated through increased understanding of the steps that led to them. Success should not be an accident.

Questions to Ask

- What strategies, questions, or tools did I use to achieve this result, and how did they help?

- What did I do well? How did I obtain that result? What do I need to work on? Why is this an area of need for me? What can I do to improve in this area?

- What did this assignment tell me about myself as a reader, writer, or thinker?

- What did the teacher do that helped me most? How did this help?

- What problems did I encounter during the course of writing this paper or reading this text? How did I solve those? Why was this solution effective?

When to Reflect on or Through Writing

There are three key times for students to reflect on how they function as readers and writers: before, during, and after. The primary purpose of such reflection is to make students more aware of their own cognitive processes and how they do or can use those processes to solve the problems they face when writing or reading in your class. Here are some examples of when I have students write to reflect:

- After writing an in-class practice AP English Literature essay, I often have students reflect on what they found difficult and how they solved that problem. In addition, I might ask students at the same time to create a checklist of what to remember to do when they take the actual exam.

- While writing a practice essay for the state exit exam, I ask students to stop writing, draw a line across the page, and then generate a list of the questions they asked and strategies they used to get what they have so far on the page. I do this to help those who are doing well to study their strategies and to allow those who are staring at a blank page after 15 minutes to figure out what is getting in the way. This pays off in useful, interesting, and often surprising ways. The boy you thought was being lazy was actually struggling with the prompt for cultural reasons. It asked him to identify an adult who has been a major influence, and he feels it will show disrespect to his parents if he says, as he wants to, his uncle; yet he also worries he will disrespect his mother if he chooses his father. Once he has named all these people in the context of the reflection, he is able to write the essay in the time left to him. After students complete this interim reflection, which takes maybe five minutes, I tell them to draw a line across the page and continue writing their essay.

- When students turn in their big essay, I ask them to take time to reflect on what they learned from the experience. In this case, I ask them to reflect on some specific things: interviewing people, using the Internet for research, choosing this topic, and evaluating their final product.

How to Teach Reflective Writing

I have worked with teachers in other subject areas to help them use writing in their classes. Instead of listing specific steps, I will illustrate how to incorporate reflective writing by offering some examples of people I have worked or spoken with. Here are a few examples that have proven successful, according to teachers in those subjects:

- In math classes, have students keep a dedicated section in their binders to reflect on the processes and emotions related to working through math problems, as well as a connection to math in the larger world.

- In social studies, ask students to reflect on the decision-making processes historical figures went through to arrive at certain political solutions in the United States, India, and South Africa. One teacher used such reflective writing to help students reflect on the process by which apartheid was abolished, assigning each student a role and asking them to respond from the perspective of that character. This guided reflection through another's perspective culminated in a Socratic seminar in which kids discussed the issues and process as if they were that character. When they finished, students then had to reflect on what happened during the seminar and what they learned from it.

- In science classes, students, much like working scientists, keep field notes or lab notes on what they do, how and why they do it, and what results they get. In this context, they also reflect on their decisions and processes, sharing those in class discussions.