

I Introduction: What Ever Happened to the Second “R”?

A Society of Writers

Where did you learn to write—or did you? I have regular conversations with teachers who avoid teaching writing. I suspect that they are not confident in their own writing abilities and so do not feel qualified or competent to delve into this somewhat abstract, undefined, and evasive subject. They are not sure what the expectation is or where to even start lesson one. The standards are less than clear. And how does one exactly *teach* writing? Programs such as Houghton Mifflin’s *Wright Source* series and Marcia Freeman’s *CraftPlus*® program provide lessons for teachers willing to include formal writing instruction as part of their instructional routines. The lessons provide detailed, purposeful, and sequential skill building that scaffolds students from the most basic of skills to the most complex. Ultimately, by the time students leave elementary school, we want them to be able to independently broaden their personal written expressions with careful word choices, varied sentence structure, and compelling ideas.

Students spend their early years in school learning to write. Once they enter the more academically focused arena (starting with third grade), teachers typically expect students to know how to take notes, study vocabulary, and demonstrate understanding of content-area concepts through writing. In essence, teachers assume students can write to learn. Yet, until this point in their schooling careers, they have not been held to this advanced level of skill application. Copying words from the board or a book along with their definitions from a glossary or dictionary, a common approach to “teaching” vocabulary, does not exactly constitute “writing.” Copying provides an opportunity for handwriting and eye-hand coordination practice, but nothing more. If we want students to truly learn the content in which we instruct them, students must also be taught how to use writing as a means to learn.

We don’t just “do math” in math class. We *use* math every day. Likewise, we shouldn’t contain writing to just writing class. We write every day across myriad situations. Think about all the words you’ve scribbled since early this morning. Lists, notes, e-mails, text messages, and blogs are part of modern society’s day-to-day routines. Some of us even allow ourselves the indulgence of keeping a journal. If you’re a department head, you may be involved in writing memos to colleagues, parents, or community members. Perhaps ticking off e-mail messages or maintaining websites connects you to others. Those of us who serve on the board of a community or sports organization write reports and summaries and generate fliers, memos, and e-mail messages specific to our purpose. We’re all writers. So why are we not confident writers?

With all this writing going on in our personal lives, one might expect an urgency to bring it to our classroom every day. The fact is, writing is the forgotten “R” in the complete education of a child. Educators are masterful reading and math teachers, but they simply expect students to know how to write, both for themselves and also for others. Teachers spend a great deal of time trying to get kids to “have a love of reading.” Rarely do we ever hear a teacher proclaim that she wants her students to love writing. Math teachers *want* their students to love math equally as much as they do, but society accepts the statement “I am not a math person.” Not so with reading, right? It is also not so with writing.

It’s About Time . . .

In order for students to become more proficient writers, they have to spend time writing. Unfortunately, this is not the finding from the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP). They report that only about 49 percent of twelfth graders are assigned a paper of three or more pages once or twice monthly in English class. These same results indicate that elementary students estimate spending about three hours a week on writing assignments (which, by the way, is about 15 percent of the time they spend watching television). This report did not provide insight into the amount of writing that occurs *outside* “English.” These results are not surprising. Writing as a subject is fit in wherever time allows. Legislative mandates requiring X minutes be spent on core-content instruction compounded by preparing for annual state and national assessments in reading, math, and science have squeezed out any available time in our instructional days. There is already little to no time to teach writing in the elementary world. In middle and high school, time becomes an even rarer resource due to the sheer numbers of students a teacher sees each day. An upper-grades teacher who assigns just one weekly one-page paper for each of his or her 150 or so students would be faced with hours of grading just that one assignment. (These findings from NAEP may be found in The College Board Report of the National Commission on Writing in America’s Schools and Colleges, 2003.)

Writing (or English) is usually taught as a separate class, with specific skills and practice related to format and grammar. We expect completed essays, stories, and poems as a result of students’ efforts in “English.” We might even expect a report (an elongated summary or essay) about a topic of interest within a content area. But writing can be so much more valuable to students were we to show them how to use writing to develop ideas, thoughts, and perspectives about a topic in their content areas of study. Students can be taught to use writing to process and extend their learning. Students can personalize knowledge, information, and skills by using writing as a way to make connections between the content and themselves. Content-area instruction could be so much richer were students empowered to use writing as a means to learn, rather than as an end in itself as it is in English class. It’s time for writing to break free of its lonely thirty- (twenty?) minute scheduled block in our elementary lesson plans and be put to use to help students learn in the content areas!

The need to act to improve the quality and quantity of writing instruction is evidenced in the business community’s dissatisfaction with exiting college students’ writing skills. In the real world, common forms of writing include e-mail, presentations (with and without visuals), technical reports, formal reports, memos, and other correspondence. Executives want presenters to make their point clear within the first sixty seconds of an oration. As business leaders, our grown students will spend

time writing technical summaries and research reports connected to their lines of work. These future projects directly relate to students' current content areas. Law students reflect on history and government. Aerospace engineers use math and science. Software designers use technical language. Since the writing our students will engage in as adults is related to specific content, learning how to write can be well served within current content areas of study rather than in "writing class."

Writing takes time. Well-designed assignments take time to develop. Writers need time to think and reflect, write and revise, and publish. Teachers need time to grade assignments and provide feedback. But all things worth doing are worth the time. We make time for the things in our lives that matter most to us, the things we value. We value our families, our friends, our children our favorite teams, and our pastimes. Do you value writing? If so, it is worth the time needed to invest in it, including the time it will take to read this book. The ideas contained within these bindings require the teacher (and the students) to invest time in them. Think about that: *invest* time. The appreciation value of the time teachers invest in writing will have big payoffs for our students' futures.

Writing for the Big Payoff

The National Commission on Writing (2003) contends that "the quality of writing [in classrooms] must improve if students are to succeed in college and in life" (p. 7). The Commission (2004), in a survey of 120 major American corporations, discovered that "writing is a ticket to professional opportunity" (p. 3). Writing is identified by the business community as a "threshold skill" among salaried (professional) employees. Both written- and oral-communication skills are essential for initial employment as well as upward mobility. Employers expect their employees to provide written and oral reports that are accurate, clear, focused, grammatically correct, and appropriate to format and audience. More than 40 percent of companies from the Commission's study admit that they train and retrain their salaried employees to write appropriately. The average cost of having to conduct these workshops is \$950 per person. If schools did their part to prepare their students for the writing demands their potential employers expect, companies would not have to squander these dollars on what should be unnecessary training.

According to the Commission's report (2004), business leaders "express a fair degree of dissatisfaction with the writing of recent college graduates—and also with academic styles of writing, unsuited to workplace needs" (p. 14). In his research, Wagner (2008) heard business leaders complain more about young employees' "fuzzy thinking" and "not knowing how to write with real voice" than about poor grammar, punctuation, or spelling (p. 22). Yet most English classes usually address the latter more than the former. It's not that students cannot write but that they cannot write well. The National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) concludes that few students can produce precise, engaging, and coherent papers. According to 1998 National Writing Achievement scores, although a majority of students (78-84 percent of fourth, eighth, and twelfth graders) have at or above basic writing skills, no more than 27 percent is at or above proficient. Only 1 percent is advanced.

A Future of Hope

The National Commission on Writing in America’s Schools and Colleges (2003) proclaims that a writing revolution will “put language and communication in their proper place in the classroom” (p. 3). The Commission recommends creating a writing agenda for the nation. This includes, but is not limited to, doubling the amount of time students spend writing, writing across the curriculum, and assigning out-of-school time for written assignments.

No one is asking any teacher to publish a book or article. The National Commission on Writing (2003) acknowledges that teachers “lack any real understanding of what good writing is or what it looks like” and that they “are often ill equipped to teach it” (p. 23). Back to the original question: When did you learn to write—or did you? Somewhere along the way, you have picked up satisfactory writing skills. Be confident that you are a writer. The ideas in this book will show teachers how to provide simple yet effective strategies that will meet all of the Commission’s suggestions on how to take action today to better prepare our students for the writing demands placed on them in their futures as productive employees. In the end, your students will learn to use writing as a means to learn, as well as a means to demonstrate learning. Yes, writing has been left behind. The time to write is today!