
The Write Stuff: Preparing the Next Generation of Writers

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STRATEGIES FOR
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Introduction: The Writing Revolution

New Standards, New Expectations

Are the students we teach ready for writing in the 21st century? The Common Core State Standards (CCSS) have placed renewed emphasis on writing skills at all grade levels and across the curriculum. Next generation technology-based assessments deploying in 2014 will certainly put those skills to the test. Are students ready for these new and rigorous expectations? Are educators equipped to instruct accordingly?

The CCSS have renamed and qualitatively redefined the composition text types. Students must now write both to inform and to explain. They must also progress over time from opinion-writing to argument-writing. Most importantly, students must develop the capacity to recognize, analyze, and utilize the various forms resident within these text types to address specific purposes and audiences. Preparing students for the more rigorous expectations of the CCSS will be instructionally demanding. It will require teachers to move beyond remedial structures such as the “five-paragraph essay.” Furthermore, writing instruction will require primacy within the literacy block. The limited writing instruction included in reading programs and literature anthologies will no longer suffice.

Ready or Not

The results of the preliminary “next generation” assessments are in, and, suffice it to say, there is cause for concern. Only 26% of students passed a recent pilot test in New York (2013, grades 3–8), down significantly from a 47% passing rate on the previous assessment. Pilots in other states have yielded very similar results. Why? Next generation assessments require students to read closely and then demonstrate their understanding of stimuli in writing, citing textual evidence to support both narrative and analytic writing. The requirement to address multiple sources in writing—and a technology platform that will be new for many students—further amplify the rigor of the testing experience. As a result, many states are bracing themselves for a significant drop in scores when the new assessments are deployed in 2014.

Especially troubling is the fact that the new standards being assessed have been deemed critical to success in college and career. The CCSS were developed by a consortium of teachers, researchers, and leading experts, under guidance from the National Governors Association and Council of Chief State School Officers, in order to prepare students for the demands of learning and working in the 21st century. Unfortunately, the new assessments reveal that a majority of our students are not on track for success after high school.

The good news? We can prepare our students for the new assessments—and for the demands of college and the workforce. But it is going to require a change in our approach to writing instruction beginning in the earliest grades. To begin preparing students for the literacy demands of the 21st century, we need to give them the “write” stuff, right now.

Behind the Standards: Writing in the 21st Century

Why Writing Matters

Writing skills are more important now than ever. We do more writing, both formal and informal, than at any other time in history, from texting and tweeting to formal reports. This is true at all levels of employment and educational attainment: the skills students need for success in college and the skills they need for success in the workplace are now considered to be one and the same.¹ The act of writing encompasses a vast number of these critical skills.

Surveys of employers show that two thirds of salaried employees across all industries have some level of writing responsibility.² Students who leave high school without basic writing proficiency are at a severe disadvantage in higher education and the workforce. They are also largely excluded from today's platforms for social and civic engagement. The CCSS and the next-generation assessments emphasize writing as a response to the growing body of evidence that reveals the critical importance of written expression in the classroom and the workplace.

Learning to Write and Writing to Learn

Consider the role of composition in the 21st century classroom. The act of writing both requires and develops higher-order thinking skills, and these in turn boost comprehension and achievement across all subject areas.³ For this reason, writing is often described as “thinking on paper.” Writing-to-learn activities such as summarizing, note taking, and response writing help students to master new concepts, make connections to what they already know, organize their thinking, and think critically about what they are learning.⁴ When students write about the texts they are reading, comprehension increases across all subjects and grade levels.⁵

*How do I know what I think
until I see what I say?*

—E.M. Forster

Writing to Learn...and Earn

Beyond the K–12 classroom, writing is a critical skill for success in college and on the job. Unfortunately, assessments designed to measure college- and career-readiness indicate that a majority of our students are not on track for success in postsecondary education or in the workplace. Only 27% of 8th and 12th grade students scored at or above proficient in writing on the 2011 National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP). Writing scores on the SAT, widely accepted as a measure of college readiness, were only 488 (out of 800) in 2013. The College Board reported that only 43% of students taking the SAT could be considered “college ready.” These assessments—and the new high-stakes assessments—are a wake-up call: if our students are not prepared to do well on these measurements, we have good reason to believe that they will also have poor outcomes in postsecondary education and in the job market.

¹ The Conference Board. (2006). *Are they really ready to work? Employers' perspectives on the basic knowledge and applied skills of new entrants to the 21st Century workforce*. Prepared with The Partnership for 21st Century Skills, Corporate Voices for Working Families, and the Society for Human Resources Management.

² National Commission on Writing in America's Schools. (2004). *Writing: A ticket to work . . . or a ticket out*. New York: College Board.

³ Bangert-Drowns, R. L., Hurley, M. M., & Wilkinson, B. (2004). The effects of school-based Writing-to-Learn interventions on academic achievement: A meta-analysis. *Review of Educational Research*, 74, 29-58.

⁴ Applebee, A. (1984). Writing and reasoning. *Review of Educational Research*, 54, 577-596; Klein, P. (1999). Reopening inquiry into cognitive processes in writing-to-learn. *Educational Psychology Review*, 11, 203-270

⁵ Graham, S. and Hebert, M. (2010). *Writing to read: Evidence for how writing can improve reading*. New York: Carnegie Corporation of New York

Writing Redefined: How Standards and Assessments Are Changing

Increased Writing Rigor in the CCSS

The Common Core State Standards require students to demonstrate writing proficiency across a range of discipline-specific tasks, purposes, and audiences. The new text types have been redefined with a greater degree of complexity. For example:

- Expository writing is no longer its own text type. Students are expected to be able to use expository structures in both Informative/Explanatory and Argument writing.
- Persuasion is also no longer a text type. Persuasion is considered a *purpose* of writing that may be accomplished through the use of any of the other text types.

CCSS writing standards require students to use writing as a vehicle for analysis of complex texts, both literary and nonfiction. Students must be able to gather evidence and insight from the texts they are reading and demonstrate their understanding in their own words. Students must demonstrate mastery in a number of specific ways:

- Write in response to a variety of sources and text types
- Form arguments using evidence from a text (or multiple texts)
- Be responsive to the needs of their audience and their specific purpose
- Use writing as part of focused, sustained research projects
- Demonstrate proficiency in grammar and language conventions

Because of their importance for college- and career-readiness, Argument and Informative/Explanatory text types are increasingly emphasized as students get older. These are the text types that students will have to use most often in higher-education and job-related writing activities.⁶ The CCSS also require writing across the curriculum. While there are no specific Common Core State Standards for science or social studies yet, discipline-specific standards are infused into the literacy standards at all grade levels, and explicitly called out in standards for Literacy in History/Social Studies, Science, and Technical Subjects in grades 6–12. Many of these standards are related to writing or will require writing in order to demonstrate proficiency.

Common Core Text Types

- **Argument or Opinion:** Writing that presents the writer's position, belief, or conclusion in a reasoned, logical way in order to change the reader's point of view or prompt action
- **Informative/Explanatory:** Writing that conveys information accurately to increase the reader's knowledge or understanding
- **Narrative:** Writing that conveys experiences in time, either real or imaginary

⁶ Common Core State Standards in English Language Arts & Literacy in History/Social Studies, Science, and Technical Subjects. Appendix A: Research Supporting Key Elements of the Standards.

Increased Expectations on Next Generation Assessments

The two predominant consortia developing CCSS assessments—the Partnership for Assessment of Readiness for College and Careers (PARCC) and the Smarter Balanced Assessment Consortium (SBAC)—will both heavily emphasize writing at every tested grade level. Because writing can assess higher-order thinking and comprehension skills better than multiple-choice questions, the new assessments will have proportionally more writing than previous assessments. Writing will, of course, be used to demonstrate comprehension on the reading portion of the ELA assessment; students must be able to respond to stimuli texts and to synthesize answers using multiple sources. But writing goes beyond ELA. The math portion of the assessments will also require students to use writing to explain their answers. Students who are not able to express their thoughts and ideas clearly in writing will be severely disadvantaged on all portions of the assessment, even if they are proficient in other ELA or math standards.

In order to perform well on the new assessments, students must adapt to new types of prompts and test items and get ready to do much more writing than previously expected. Many of them will also have to adapt to new testing platforms, as PARCC and SBAC move to online assessments. Students who are unfamiliar with the platform and format of the new tests are likely to struggle.

Success with Strategies for Writers

A study of 4th and 7th graders in 22 schools demonstrated that students using Zaner-Bloser's *Strategies for Writers* made gains in writing proficiency that were significantly higher than gains made by control groups using other materials, including stand-alone writing programs and basal reading programs. The effect was pronounced for the text types most critical for future academic and workplace success: Opinion or Argument and Informative/Explanatory.⁷

Are your students ready to . . .

- Support claim(s) with logical reasoning and relevant, accurate data and evidence that demonstrate an understanding of the topic or text, using credible sources (CCSS.ELA-Literacy.WHST.6-8.1b)
- Use words, phrases, and clauses to create cohesion and clarify the relationships among claim(s), counterclaims, reasons, and evidence (CCSS.ELA-Literacy.WHST.6-8.1c)
- Introduce a topic clearly, previewing what is to follow; organize ideas, concepts, and information into broader categories as appropriate to achieving purpose (CCSS.ELA-Literacy.WHST.6-8.2a)
- Use appropriate and varied transitions to create cohesion and clarify the relationships among ideas and concepts (CCSS.ELA-Literacy.WHST.6-8.2c)
- Establish and maintain a formal style and objective tone (CCSS.ELA-Literacy.WHST.6-8.2e)

⁷ University of Cincinnati Evaluation Services Center (2013). *Zaner-Bloser Strategies for Writers Evaluation*. Cincinnati, OH: University of Cincinnati Evaluation Services Center.

Six-Point Plan for Writing Success

In order to prepare our students to meet these new standards, we must change the way we teach writing. Unfortunately, many basal reading programs (including the new Common Core editions) do not include adequate, appropriate, rigorous instruction in the CCSS Writing and Language standards, especially at the early grades. But early, focused attention to writing is critical if we want to ensure that students are prepared for increasing academic demands in middle school, high school, and beyond. There are specific steps that teachers and educational leaders can take now to prepare their students for success:

- **Provide focused, explicit writing instruction at all grade levels.** Explicit writing instruction begins at the very earliest grades. Districts relying on a basal reading program for writing instruction may need a supplemental writing program in order to prepare students for CCSS writing.
- **Model effective writing for students.** Students need to read and analyze models for each of the text types in the CCSS. Using clear, age-appropriate rubrics for each text type can help students analyze the models and shape their own writing.
- **Devote significant time to writing.** Students should have many opportunities to write for different tasks, purposes, and audiences for varying lengths of time. As appropriate, they should also be given time to do research and to make improvements to their writing over multiple drafts during the revising step of the writing process.
- **Emphasize the text types critical for success in college and career.** Informative/Explanatory and Opinion or Argument text types are the most critical for academic and career success. Students should spend 60% of their time on these text types in elementary grades and 80% in the upper grades.
- **Give students opportunities to practice writing under assessment conditions.** Students should frequently do authentic and meaningful writing in a format that approximates the demands of the PARCC and SBAC assessments. They should also have an opportunity to use technology for writing practice, as most students will take the new assessments online.
- **Make professional development a priority.** Teachers at all grade levels and in all subject areas should be fully proficient in the CCSS text types and understand how they can be used in their respective disciplines and at each grade level.

Giving Our Students “The Write Stuff”

To make sure our students are prepared for success on “next generation” assessments, and ready for college and career, we must renew our instructional emphasis upon writing at all grade levels. Focused instruction and adequate practice time are absolutely essential to the mastery of writing skills. Writing must be explicitly modeled and taught. Lending primacy to writing instruction will undoubtedly result in higher academic achievement and greater economic success for our students. We cannot afford to wait. The need is urgent. The reasons are clear. The time is now.

About the Author

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James Scott Miller has taught students in all grade levels, Kindergarten through 12. He holds a master's degree in curriculum and instruction from National University. He has served as a literacy coach, an instructional specialist, and as a coordinator of writing instruction. While employed with Clovis Unified School District, Mr. Miller worked with many dedicated administrators and teachers to help establish the "Buchanan Area Writing Project." The project successfully articulated a process-based, trait-specific model for writing instruction among nearly three hundred teachers in nine area schools.

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