

Effective Practices in the Assignment and Assessment of Student Writing

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### Abstract

Proficiency in writing ranks high on the list of skills that students are expected to acquire for success both within the educational system and in the workplace. Conquering the complexities of advanced writing requires extensive practice by students and large investments of time by teachers who assess the writing and provide feedback for improvement. Effective teacher practices during the assignment phase and during the assessment phase increase the likelihood that the writing that arrives on the teacher's desk is the student's best work and that the teacher's response to the student's work elicits significant improvement in subsequent student writing. Best practices during the assignment phase include clarification of the writing task, providing tools for self-assessment and requiring peer review. Best teacher response practices include giving feedback electronically, using well-designed rubrics, commenting effectively and holding writing conferences. Several meta-analysis studies provide quantitative data on the effect size of teacher practices, while numerous qualitative studies provide information about how those practices were applied by teachers in classroom settings. While no formulaic approach emerges from the literature the consistent application of best practices maximizes improvement in student writing without adding burdensome time demands on teachers.

### Effective Practices in the Assignment and Assessment of Student Writing

Proficient and advanced student writing skills are a high priority for educators at every level of schooling. Business leaders decry the impact of employees' poor writing skills on their usefulness in the workplace (Cole, Hembroff, & Corner, 2009; National Commission on Writing, 2004), and American industries spend more than 3 billion dollars per year in remediating their workers' writing skills (Graham & Perin, 2007; Kellogg and Whiteford, 2009). Within classrooms from elementary schools to colleges, writing tasks increase a student's learning in a content area (Bangert-Drowns, Hurley, & Wilkinson, 2004), and for later adolescents academic writing goes beyond a way to tell about their knowledge and becomes a way for them to transform and clarify their knowledge (Bereiter & Scardamalia, as cited in Kellogg & Whiteford, 2009; Sommers & Saltz, 2004). Based on a combination of multiple choice questions on writing mechanics and a timed essay, the SAT II Writing test is a strong predictor of college success, its scores more highly correlated with freshman GPA than either the Verbal Reasoning or the Mathematics sections of the SAT I test (Geiser & Roger, 2001). Clearly the work of the elementary and secondary writing teacher is important both in and beyond their own classrooms as students use writing to learn, to share their learning with others and to succeed in both higher education and the marketplace.

The pathway to proficiency, though, is not easy for either the student or the teachers who serve as guides. Evidence indicates that reaching a level of expertise in any complicated skill takes at least ten thousand hours of practice (Ericsson, Krampe, & Tesch-Romer, 1993). Writing meets the criteria of a complicated skill; it taxes the working memory and demands that the writer harness multiple cognitive skills simultaneously (Fitts, 1964; Kellogg & Whiteford, 2009). Even if every instructional hour of a four-year high school education were devoted to the task of

writing, a student would not arrive halfway to logging ten thousand hours of practice. Not only does the student face a mammoth amount of time on his way to skillful writing, but his teachers face the task of reading and evaluating his work in order to help him improve (Connors & Lunsford, 1993; Lee, 2009).

The time demands that writing puts on both students and teachers is no secret within educational institutions (Sommers, 1982). Teachers must either assign significant amounts of written homework or give students large periods of time during the school day time to hone their writing skills, options that are often objectionable to parents and impractical for teachers whose class time is largely needed for addressing academic standards in various subject areas. Teachers often avoid the assignment of written work in part because of the burdensome task of evaluating it once it is turned in (Kellogg & Whiteford, 2009; Lee, 2009). As an acknowledgment of the time demands of evaluating writing, the National Council of Teachers of English published suggested guidelines for workload for teachers of courses that involve large volumes of written student work (Lee, 2009). Where those courses used to be primarily located within English departments, the emphasis of writing-across-the-curriculum and writing-in-the-disciplines has spread the burden to other departments as well (Stern & Solomon, 2006).

Because the stakes are high for students' acquisition of writing skills and because the investment of teacher time and effort is high, the subject of writing has received significant research attention, both quantitative and qualitative. My goal in this report is to review the research literature to identify the best practices of teachers for the assignment and assessment of writing, practices that most effectively lead to improved student writing while not placing unrealistic demands on teachers' time. Some effective practices involve requirements that teachers place on students before their written work is handed in; other practices are part of the

teacher's response to students' writing. I have not included direct writing instruction practices in the scope of this report, since that instruction primarily precedes the giving of writing assignments. For the purposes of my report, I will assume that writing assignments require students to apply, or practice, the skills that they have already been directly taught.

Because I aim to use the results of this study in a secondary school, I have limited my literature search to the research studies that targeted adolescent writers, from middle school to early college. A variety of types of schools are represented in the various studies to which I referred—public and private; urban, suburban and rural; large and small. While much has been written about the teaching of writing in elementary school, I have chosen to focus my work on those students who have already mastered handwriting and most spelling and who are largely proficient with basic punctuation and sentence and paragraph structure.

### **Effective Writing Assignment Requirement**

A common experience among teachers is the discouraging realization that the written work being read and evaluated is less than that particular student's best attempt at fulfilling the assignment; the experience becomes particularly disheartening when the teacher realizes that steps could have been put in place to encourage better student work from the start. Teacher time is best used on written work that already reflects significant student effort prior to the teacher's assessment of it. Particular practices that lead to better work being handed in include clearly articulating assignment goals, equipping students with tools for self-assessment and requiring peer review.

### **Clarifying Assignment Goals**

Writing tasks undertaken by adults typically involve a clearly defined audience and an understanding of the message that is to be communicated to that audience. School writing

assignments often involve neither. An advanced writer successfully compares what he intends to convey, what his text actually says and the possible interpretations of the text by his readers, making adjustments both as he writes and during revisions (Calabrese, 1982; De La Paz & McCutchen, 2011; Kellogg & Whiteford, 2009). If students have either a vague sense of audience or a poor grasp on the message that is to be communicated, they are unable to assess their own writing for issues of clarity. Authentic assignments in which students write for someone other than the teacher provide students with a clearer sense of audience as they do their work, enabling them to begin assessing how readers might interpret their texts (Beach & Friedrich, 2006; MacArthur, 2007). Assignments such as writing letters to particular people on the issue being studied or persuasive essays designed to influence a specific group of people give students a much clearer goal than when assigned a generic essay on a topic (Conner & Moulton, 2000; Ferretti, MacArthur, & Dowdy, 2000; Midgette, Haria, & MacArthur, 2008; White, 1969).

The identification of an audience for a particular assignment should be coupled with clearly defined goals and standards for the assignment (Calfee & Miller, 2007). Because writing occurs in classrooms across disciplines, teachers of all subjects need to help students understand the distinct characteristics that are part of the writing genres in particular fields of study (De La Paz & McCutchen, 2011; Newell, Loukis, & Boster, 2007). Checklists and rubrics can include both these discipline-specific standards and general writing requirements for the assignment.

### **Tools for Student Self-Assessment and Revising**

In addition to clarifying the expectations for a given assignment, the use of checklists and rubrics as self-assessment tools have been shown to improve student writing (Daiute and Scardamalia & Bereiter, as cited in Andrade & Boulay, 2003), particularly when students can demonstrate an understanding of the criteria listed in the rubric (Paul, Merry, & Callaghan,

2004). The effectiveness of rubrics for student self-assessment increases when the rubric is created as a class activity while using a teacher-selected model essay (Andrade, Du, & Mycek, 2010) and also when the criteria used in the rubric or checklist is specific rather than general in nature (MacArthur, 2007). Used in this way, rubrics are not simply tools for determining a grade but rather are means of instruction and formative self-assessment (Andrade et al., 2010), leading students to make revisions in their writing prior to a teacher's receiving the work. Word processing makes the process of revision less daunting, so students are more apt to make substantial changes in their written work when using a computer (Perin, 2007). Equipping students to revise their own writing prior to teacher intervention provides them practice with a skill that is used extensively by advanced writers (Kellogg & Whiteford, 2009; MacArthur, 2007; Treglia, 2008), thus giving student a long-term benefit while also giving the teacher the shorter-term benefit of receiving higher quality work from students.

### **Peer Review**

Inserting a peer review stage into the process of assignment completion is another way to improve student writing before it arrives on the teacher's desk (Smith, 2008). Surveys of college students regarding which high school practices effectively prepared them show that working with peers in the revision process contributes to readiness for college writing tasks (Enders, 2001). Giving students direction in how to conduct peer review can be effective in overcoming their reluctance to point out flaws and lack of clarity in others' work, particularly by providing specific rather than general criteria for evaluating writing (MacArthur, 2007). Advanced writers use global revisions to make substantial improvements in the organization of their writing while most novice writers tend to define revision as only local changes below the level of sentence structure ( mDe La Paz & McCutchen, 2011;Wallace & Hayes, as cited in Wallace et al., 1996).

Teachers who had peer reviewers write outlines or abstracts of the other student's writing observed that after the original writers read the outline or abstract, they better perceived where their writing had become unclear to a reader and were more likely to make global revisions that improved clarity rather than minor editing changes (Covill, 2010). Peer review is also possible outside of classroom through the use of the internet. Teacher-moderated wiki discussion forums on class websites can provide students with feedback from their classmates (Corrigan, 2010), while internet-based peer review sites such as SWoRD (scaffolded writing and rewriting in the discipline) offer a more formalized peer review process (Kellogg & Whiteford, 2009).

### **Teacher Response**

After the student writer has followed the guidelines for a clearly defined assignment, has self-assessed the draft and has responded to peer feedback, the written work is ready to be assessed by the teacher. Teacher response can occur electronically, in written form or through a conversation with the student. While teachers often feel pressure to respond fully to all student work, intermittent response is highly effective in eliciting student improvement in writing (Kellogg & Whiteford, 2009; Smith, 2008), possibly because the absence of a grade keeps the student focused on the writing task rather than on his performance in comparison with other students (Ruth, 1987). The teacher's goal in responding to written work needs to be more than simply defense of the grade given; student improvement and the development of advanced writing skills is the aim. Although teachers can work to make their investment of time in evaluating written work as efficient as possible, no simple formula applies to the assessment of student writing (Mitchler, 2006).

Some general principles apply to effective teacher response. Rather than giving a summative assessment on only a final draft of student work, teacher feedback is more useful to



students when it comes on early drafts of a project (Stern & Solomon, 2006). Students who receive feedback only on final drafts tend to focus on writing mechanics rather than overall organization and flow of their papers (Sommers, 1982). Surveys of students on what types of faculty response is most helpful to them in improving their writing show that comments or checklists that serve simply to justify a teacher's final grade are not instructive or perceived as helpful (Smith, 2008).

Response by teachers to student work deals with one of three aspects of the writing: mechanics, rhetoric or content. Mechanical problems in writing are the easiest to identify and take the least time to correct. Most teachers, especially those outside English departments, are most comfortable addressing these types of errors in student writing, possibly because there is usually a right or wrong judgment to be made (Fang & Wang, 2011; Stern & Solomon, 2006). Content problems in student work are often due to erroneous or insufficient information. Most often, students respond to correction in the area of content by simply making the paper longer (Beach & Friedrich, 2006). Rhetorical aspects of student writing present the most complex demands on teacher response, but growth in student writing skill depends on teachers consistently providing rhetorical feedback (Beach & Friedrich, 2006).

### **Electronic Tools**

In an age when students may submit their work electronically rather than on paper, teachers find that responding electronically is both effective and efficient (Dunford, 2011). Word Processing programs such as Microsoft Word offer comment features that allow a teacher to embed comments in student papers in speedy and readable fashion. A teacher may make suggested changes in a student's work while using the Track Changes feature, allowing the student to see both his original text and the teacher's suggested revision (Hart, 2008). One

teacher reported creating a set of short-cut key strokes that quickly added frequently used comments into the student papers (Dunford, 2011). One advantage of electronic assignment submission and teacher response is that the teacher can save a record of each draft, along with the comments given to the student for later reference.

### **Rubrics**

Well-designed rubrics can provide teachers with a tool for giving students feedback on a wide variety of factors in their writing, everything from mechanical issues of spelling, grammar and formatting to rhetorical topics of style, voice and effective organization of an argument. Rubrics are particularly effective when developed for use across the disciplines within an educational institution (Mansilla, Duraisingh, Wolfe, & Haynes, 2009). While teachers tailor aspects of the rubric to their particular discipline, the foundational sections of the rubric remain the same and provide students with repetitive and instructive feedback on their writing skills (Mansilla et al., 2009).

Those who criticize the use of rubrics in the evaluation of writing cite either the impersonal aspects of the standardized rubrics or the vague nature of many rubrics (Fang & Wang, 2011; Kohn, 2006). The former problem is alleviated when the rubric is only one of a teacher's vehicles for response. Combined with personal written comments or a teacher-student writing conference, a rubric can provide clear and concise feedback to a student without seeming cold (Enders, 2001; Spandel, 2006). The criticism that rubrics are vague, and, therefore, not instructive to students, can be eliminated through better rubric design. When a rubric contains only a few categories for evaluation, those categories are necessarily vague (Fang & Wang, 2011). If the rubric's design contains not only major factors but also more detailed sub-points, it will provide the student with specific formative instruction (Mansilla et al., 2009; Spandel,

2006). Detailed rubrics additionally provide a teacher with a way to point out strengths in a piece of student writing that is generally poor or flaws in writing that is generally strong (Potts, 2010).

Rubrics also offer selective, or focused, feedback, a practice whose effectiveness corresponds with that of intermittent response (Stern & Solomon, 2006). In selective feedback the teacher does not make numerous corrections but rather points out patterns of error in student work. Students are then responsible to identify the additional errors that fit the pattern that the teacher has identified. When rubrics are used to give this selective feedback, teachers resist making numerous corrections throughout the student's work, a practice that students find frustrating (MacArthur, 2007; Treglia, 2008). One type of mark that is effective when combined with a rubric's selective feedback is the simple underlining of student errors throughout their work without comment or correction (Beach & Friedrich, 2006). The underlining serves to flag the portions of writing in which the student must identify the type of error and then work to correct it, increasing his skill of self-assessment.

### **Effective Comments**

Teachers spend a great deal of time with pen in hand when assessing student work. Choosing to comment and correct wisely involves knowing the kinds of commentary that students find most helpful in improving their work. Taking time to write comments that students do not understand or that do not motivate them to improve is a waste of both time and ink. While no formula for effective commenting exists, general trends arise when students are asked about what they find helpful.

A common complaint of students is the placement of a grade at the end of the paper with no instructive comments throughout the paper (Bardine, Bardine, & Deegan, 2000; Holmes & Smith, as cited in Smith, 2008). Being told what could be done better the next time is important

to many students, and they are disappointed when a teacher's few comments appear only to be in defense of the grade being assigned (Calabrese, 1982; Stern & Solomon, 2006). Positive comments are not necessarily perceived as more helpful than negative comments; the deciding factor in students' reaction and subsequent writing improvement is whether the comments are instructive, not whether they are positive or negative (Bardine, Bardine, & Deegan, 2000; Hattie & Timperley, 2007, as cited in Kellogg & Whiteford, 2009; Treglia, 2008). Comments that provide a student direction in how to correct an error are more effective than comments that simply flag the error itself (Beach & Friedrich, 2006; Blake, 1994; Bellah, as cited in Stern & Solomon, 2006).

Responding as a reflective reader rather than a judge also increases the effectiveness of a teacher's comments (Calabrese, 1982; MacArthur, 2007; Smith, 2008). Commenting on an unclear passage in student work with something like "You lost me here," is interpreted as more helpful than a blunt, "Clarify" (Bardine et al., 2000; Beach & Friedrich, 2006). Teachers who respond to student writing in the form of a personal letter or note observe subsequent improvement in student writing as their advice is heeded more frequently (Batt, 2005). These letters need not be long; personal tone is the key. Teachers who respond as readers are able to give students instructive feedback without usurping control of the student's work, a trait that is preferred by students and that elicits increased effort from the student (Beach & Friedrich, 2006; Treglia, 2008). The few students who prefer a more straightforward judgment of their work tend to make only superficial corrections to their writing in contrast with the more global and substantial changes made by those who teachers commented in relational fashion (Beach & Friedrich, 2006; Treglia, 2008).

### **Writing Consultations**

The most personal vehicle for a teacher to respond to student writing is with a one-on-one conference or writing consultation. Although the time investment is high in scheduling these individual meetings, the impact on students' writing is high (Bardine et al., 2000; LaFontana, 1996; Mitchler, 2006; Puhr & Workman, 1992). Conferences can be scheduled early in the writing process as a way to help clarify the assignment's direction (Beach & Friedrich, 2006) but are more often used after a teacher's assessment of a draft (Bardine et al., 2000). Some teachers make themselves available for students who desire a conversation about their writing (Bardine et al., 2000) while others require each student to sign-up for an allotted time slot, not allowing any student to avoid having a conference (Blake, 1994).

When used as a follow-up to a teacher's written comment or rubric feedback, a writing consultation allows the student to ask for clarification of that feedback (Beach & Friedrich, 2006; Bardine et al., 2000). The teacher can elaborate on previously written comments and may also use the conversation as a way to mitigate negative comments or to expand on feedback (Bardine et al., 2000). Discussion of the student's arguments and ideas during these consultations serve to refine the student's thoughts on the paper and provide a dialectic exchange that otherwise may not happen in the writing process (Beach & Friedrich, 2006). Writing conferences also offer teachers an opportunity to give individualized writing instruction in areas of particular weakness. Conferences are particularly well-suited as a way to deal with grammar errors made by individual students but not the majority of a class (Bardine et al., 2000).

### **Analysis of Literature**

Improving the quality of student writing attracts much attention in educational publications, as there is seemingly universal agreement that writing skills are necessary for the

future success of students, both within the educational system itself and in employment situations. Not surprisingly the vast majority of the articles that I found were qualitative in nature, with teachers sharing their classroom practices and the effects that they observed on their students' writing. These relatively small samples of students did not alone generate statistically significant findings even though teachers reported seeing noticeable improvements in many cases.

Several meta-analysis studies served to provide the bulk of the quantitative information. The effect size of particular teacher practices on the improvement of student writing was reported, and trends became more evident. Other meta-analysis studies used student opinion on what had most helped them to learn to write well. These large quantitative studies helped me to choose the smaller qualitative reports that I would include, according to their connection to practices that were shown to be most effective in the meta-analyses.

I did not find any glaring gaps in the literature, either in the number of articles available or in the topics that I searched. If a reader were interested in expanding the literature review, the trail of references would be further fruitful. Writing instruction and assessment does not appear to be a fad in educational research as the rate of publications on the topic has remained relatively steady over the last couple decades.

### **Conclusion**

Writing is not a skill easily measured, nor is there a prescribed perfect combination of words towards which each student should aim as there would be one right solution in a mathematics problem. Rather than being an objectively right or wrong endeavor, writing is judged on its effectiveness. Did the writer convincingly and beautifully communicate his ideas to the reader, or not? The answer will be complex, nuanced and difficult to quantify. The more

easily measured aspects of writing, such as punctuation, spelling and grammar usage, are only a sliver of what makes a piece of writing effective, and it may be more accurate to say that they are simply potential impediments to effectiveness rather than steppingstones towards it.

Just as there is not one perfect piece of writing, there is not one prescribed pathway towards successful writing. Rather, a relatively defined list of teacher practices shows positive effects on student writing when consistently applied. Each teacher must select from that list according to the needs of particular students and the resources of time available. In so doing, less teacher time will be wasted on unheeded or misunderstood comments, and the time invested will bear more fruit in the students' improved writing skills.

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