College and Career Readiness Standards for Writing

Deepening and Widening the Way We Teach Writing in K–8

Strategies to help students overcome the prior knowledge problem in writing.

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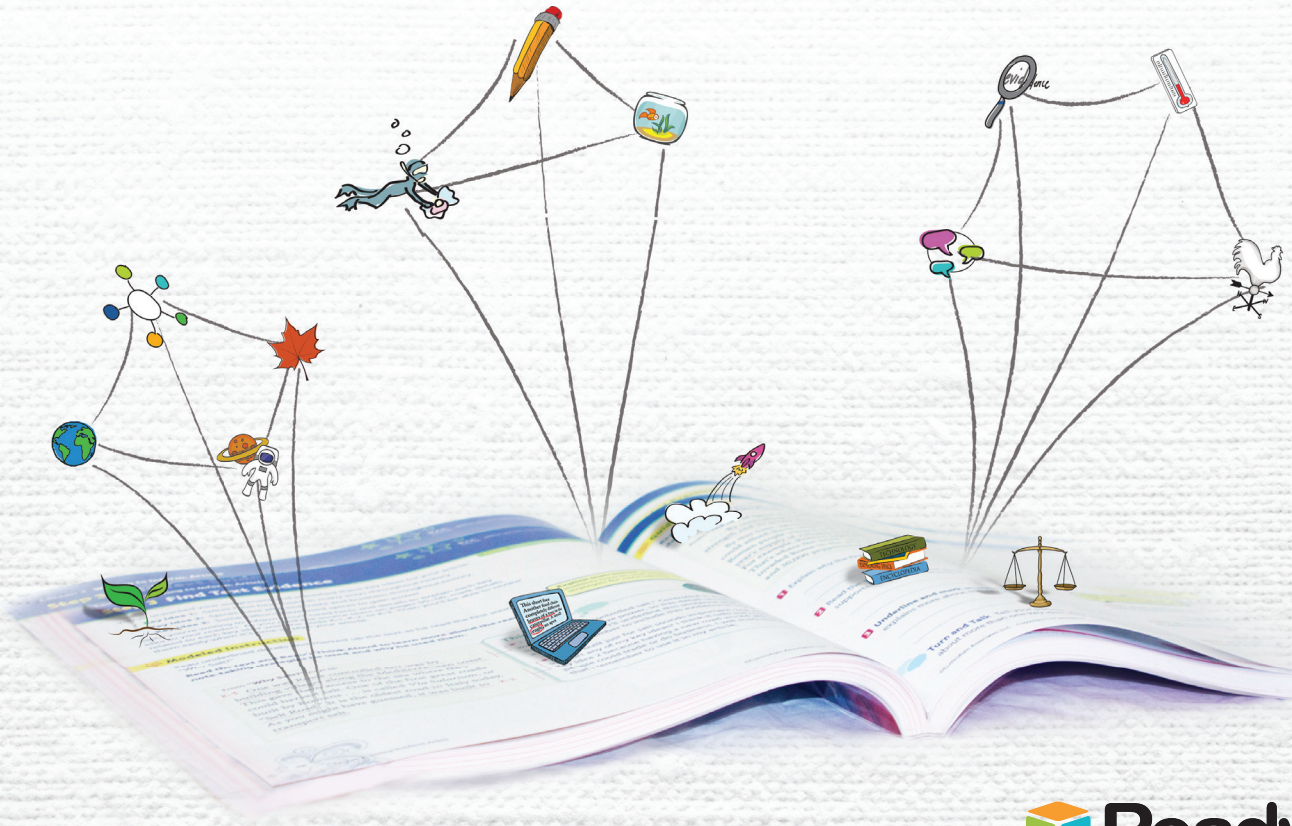

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Introduction:

Meeting the New Standards

In the past, much less time and effort was spent on teaching writing than on the other two Rs, but today schools and districts all over the country are implementing new writing expectations from the Common Core State Standards (CCSS) and other similar standards. The most successful classrooms are increasing the amount of writing students do and using the writing process as a vehicle for standards-based writing instruction.

Now is the time to make sure our implementation of the new writing expectations is in-depth and ongoing.

Most K–8 educators now accept that we must prepare students to meet the writing demands of today's more rigorous language arts assessments and tomorrow's college and career readiness requirements. It is exhilarating to see writing instruction return to the elementary grades, and many elementary and middle schools are off to a good start in teaching writing. However, there is still much work to be done. Now is the time to make sure our implementation of the new writing expectations is in-depth and ongoing.

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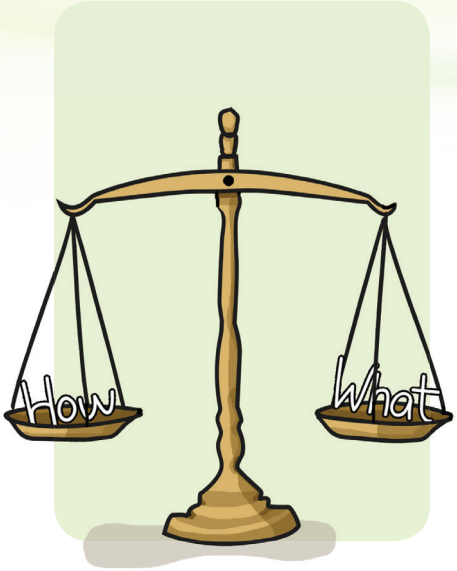

Two Sides of Writing: The How and the What

The new writing expectations capture the multifaceted and developmental aspects of writing remarkably well. They neither ignore conventions nor make them the main focus of instruction. They recognize that full-fledged writing instruction should not typically begin until third grade but that children should be writing—and learning how to write better—from kindergarten on. They also make a vital distinction that was largely ignored in previous approaches to teaching writing—the difference between the how and the what.

The How: The Skill of Writing

The new writing standards call for students to learn how to write good opinion pieces/arguments, informational pieces, and narratives. Student writers must demonstrate command of language and mechanics conventions and use a formal style. Writing—including in the content areas—is expected to become "routine" by third grade, and students must learn to use the writing process to strengthen some of what they write. Thus students learn how to write better by gradually increasing the amount of writing they do and by receiving standards-based writing instruction in planning, revision, and editing.

The What: The Content of Writing

The new standards do not stop with the how of writing, but also stress the importance of knowledge in writing. They expect students to acquire and use Tier 2 and 3 meaning vocabulary. Students must be able to gain information for writing from print and digital sources, draw evidence from grade-appropriate sources, and write for a range of discipline-specific tasks.

The synergistic benefits of writing and knowledge are integrated into the new standards.

Research has long shown that writing and knowledge are interconnected—that in order to write well, students need to know about the topic, and that, conversely, in order to build rich knowledge of literature, social studies, and science, they need to write.

The synergistic benefits of writing and knowledge are integrated into the new standards. As today's students enter the world of college and careers, they face rigorous expectations with regard to writing and knowledge, and the new standards are designed to reflect those expectations.

The Prior Knowledge Problem in Writing

Hillocks (*1986b*) and Bereiter and Scardamalia (*1987*) established the importance of background knowledge for writers, and this body of research added the term *prior knowledge* to the vocabulary of writing educators.

In order to write, we must write about something. We cannot write well about something we do not know *(Olinghouse, Graham, & Gillespie, 2014)*, and we cannot write clearly and interestingly about something for which we lack the vocabulary *(Olinghouse, & Leaird, 2009; Olinghouse & Wilson, 2013)*.

Consequently, what students know prior to writing is essential to their writing success. The lack of prior knowledge is one of the main reasons some students do not like writing and others have trouble writing much or well. Even students who are good spellers, use appropriate capitalization and punctuation, and like to write, often produce only very short and simple writing, because they do not know much about the world or have many words in their vocabularies.

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The old solution: Personalized writing

During the last century, experts on teaching writing were aware that a lack of prior knowledge could be a serious obstacle for students, and their most frequent solution was personalized writing. Students were advised to write about "what you know." They were expected to choose their own writing topics so they would be more likely to have the necessary knowledge and vocabulary at their command.

This solution still has value, particularly for young or struggling writers, who are often more willing initially to write about what they know and care about. Indeed, Common Core writing standard 8 acknowledges the continued value of personalized writing when it calls for students in grades K–5 to "recall information from experiences" in order to write about them.

However, personalized writing alone is an inadequate solution to the prior knowledge problem in writing. Many students tire of always having to decide what to write about, and they often lack a solid understanding of what they have experienced or the vocabulary to describe it. Most importantly, personalized writing tries to work around the prior knowledge problem rather than reduce it.

The new solution: Deepening and widening writing instruction

The new writing expectations call for a new solution to the prior knowledge problem. We must deepen our writing instruction to increase the likelihood that students will have the knowledge and vocabulary to complete a particular writing assignment successfully. We must also widen our writing instruction to help students acquire more knowledge so they can apply it to learning and assessment tasks.

Deepening Writing Instruction

We deepen writing instruction by giving students access to background knowledge before they begin a piece of writing, including general academic (Tier 2) and domain-specific (Tier 3) meaning vocabulary appropriate to the topic or narrowed by the prompt. K–8 teachers can deepen writing instruction as follows.

Arrange language experiences and give demonstrations

Provide primary-grade students with engaging language experiences before writing to help overcome their lack of prior knowledge. For example, have them feed the fish in the classroom, go on a tour of the school, or act out a story, before writing about that experience. For older students, conduct an experiment in science or demonstrate something that is relevant to a literature, science, or social studies lesson, then have students write about that experiment or demonstration.

Example for Primary Grades:

1. *Place several different objects in a pillowcase.*
2. *Have several children take turns wearing a blindfold and reaching into the pillowcase to pick an object.*
3. *Ask each child to explore the object and try to guess what it is while the rest of the class watches.*
4. *Have the child remove the blindfold and name the object, or give the child the name if necessary.*
5. *Ask the children to write about the experience, narrating what happened and referring to the names of the objects and the children who reached into the pillowcase.*

Example for Intermediate Grades:

1. *Use your school's weather station or specific weather measuring devices for a few days when the forecast predicts variable weather. The more devices the better (thermometer, barometer, wind vane, anemometer, rain gauge, etc.).*
2. *Stop every few hours and record the various measurements beside the date and time on a chart or interactive whiteboard. Lead a brief class discussion on whether or not the measurements have changed since the last time and by how much.*
3. *After the measuring period ends, put your students in trios or other small groups and have each group graph the results of one of the measurements across the time those measurements were taken. Have each group report to the class what their graph tells them about recent changes in the weather.*
4. *Have the students each write about the experience and what they learned about how the weather can change over a few days.*

Integrate writing with vocabulary instruction of topical word sets

The new standards require that students learn general academic and domain-specific vocabulary, and the optimum time to address this requirement is during content units in science or social studies or theme study in English language arts. To know words and phrases, students must know about the topics they refer to, and students also need adequate repetition with word meanings over time in order to learn them. In a content unit or theme, the most useful Tier 2 and Tier 3 vocabulary together make up a topical word set that builds over multiple lessons. Teaching a topical word set helps students learn the knowledge that underlies the vocabulary as well as the meaningful relationships among the words and phrases in the set. Students will learn the vocabulary meanings better and be better able to write about the content if the topical word set is posted in the classroom and added to during the unit or theme, and if they are encouraged to write on occasion during the unit or theme using some of the words in the topical set so far.

They will be more likely to use the words when they write because they are not required to remember them or how to spell them, and after using the words several times in writing their knowledge of them will improve.

Example for Grades 3–5:

1. *Put up a chart with the names of the eight planets or use your whiteboard.*
2. *Add related words from time to time such as the names of some of the larger moons.*
3. *Depending on the grade, gradually add words such as "orbit," "rotation," "asteroid," "comet," and "ring."*
4. *Teach the word meanings as you teach the related knowledge.*
5. *Ask students to write about an imaginary space flight through the solar system and use some of the words in the topical word set.*
6. *Praise students who use several of the words.*
7. *Notice that students will tend to use a few more words in the next assignment because you have praised individuals for their use, but not made the task onerous by requiring a set number of words.*
8. *Their writing will be better because they have the necessary knowledge and can focus on how to write about it.*

To know words and phrases, students must know about the topics they refer to, and students also need adequate repetition with word meanings over time in order to learn them.

Engage students in inquiry-based writing

Research indicates that students benefit from working in small groups to explore an assortment of objects such as leaves or rocks before writing about them individually *(Hillocks, 1986a; Graham & Perin, 2007)*. Inquiry activities can also be designed around high-quality photographs of similar people or places. Inquiry activities allow students to determine how they will investigate objects or pictures and then share and discuss their thinking before they begin to write.

Example for Grades 6–8:

1. *In the fall, collect a few dozen fallen leaves from a park or forest with many different trees in a small area.*
2. *Put students into groups of three and give each group an assortment of 10–12 leaves.*
3. *Ask each group to examine their leaves and think about how they are alike, how they are different, what features strike them, which leaves they like, and so on.*
4. *Later, have students write individually about what they learned from examining the leaves.*

Have students write to print and digital sources

An important way we can help students overcome the prior knowledge problem in writing is to have them write to sources. A source is any text, printed or on a computer screen, that provides students with information they need for writing. One writes "to" or "from" a source when one uses knowledge drawn from that source.

Writing to sources is a part of the new writing expectations and is included in the new assessments of progress toward college and career readiness. However, writing to sources can be challenging for both students and teachers, so the sequence of instruction is very important, starting with a source that is informative and engaging. The following activities reflect one way to sequence instruction.

Have students write opinion pieces and arguments about books and other texts

The new standards require that students write opinion pieces about books they have read, beginning in kindergarten, and students must continue to describe and defend how they feel about a book or text through eighth grade and beyond.

This activity provides a perfect opportunity to introduce writing to sources. Students are usually more engaged with both reading and writing when they are encouraged to form, express, and defend their opinions.

Inquiry activities allow students to determine how they will investigate objects or pictures and then share and discuss their thinking before they begin to write.

Teach students to use evidence from texts without plagiarizing

Students need to learn to ground their writing to sources in textual evidence, but they must also learn how to do this without simply copying the source.

One way to approach this issue is to require for several weeks that students write with the source closed. If they need to consult the source again, they must stop writing until they have closed the source. Another way is to use interactive teaching, wherein the class puts textual information in their own words as the teacher does the writing, with the students making suggestions for what the teacher should write. Such interactive teaching lessons work best when the students all read the same source and help the teacher compose a short paper, as the teacher constantly reminds and leads them to put the information from the source into their own words and integrate it with what they know from elsewhere.

Widening Writing Instruction

We widen writing instruction when we extend it beyond the writing block into the content areas. When students regularly write to learn and conduct short research projects, their knowledge of literature, science, and social studies content increases, adding to their prior knowledge, including their meaning vocabularies, for use in future reading comprehension, writing, and content learning.

Have students write to learn—and to show what they've learned

Advanced study in any field, from biology to history to art, requires that students write informational or persuasive papers and respond to essay questions on examinations. College professors have long been aware of the value of writing to learn and writing to assess learning, meaning that students are not "college ready" until they can do so. Consequently, the new standards call for writing to be a part of instruction in literature, social studies, and science from the beginning.

Elicit quick writes across the curriculum

Research shows that writing to learn does not always have to involve extended writing *(Bangert-Drowns, Hurley, & Wilkinson, 2004)*. One of the first ways to increase the amount of writing is via quick writes or think writes. Students are given a specific amount of time—between one and five minutes, with shorter times first—and they may write on regular paper, scratch paper, index cards, or sticky notes. The teacher can read or refer to students' quick writes during discussions, but students never revise or edit their quick writes, and they are not graded except for a cooperation grade.

We widen writing instruction when we extend it beyond the writing block into the content areas.

Quick writes help students become more cognitively and emotionally engaged in their learning. The most common quick writes ask students to summarize or answer questions about what they have learned, but other quick writes that ask students to reflect on the difficulties they encountered and how they addressed the difficulties can be even more valuable because they build students' metacognition *(Bangert-Drowns, Hurley, & Wilkinson, 2004)*.

Quick writes before learning—when students predict what may happen or write what they already know about a topic—are underutilized and can stimulate students to work harder and smarter. Teachers can ask students to take notes or complete a graphic organizer during learning and then refer to these quick writes later when they discuss the lesson. Quick writes can continue throughout the year, but are best used in the early months as a transition to longer pieces of content writing.

Have students write for topic-specific tasks

In the past, we have asked students in third grade and beyond to answer the questions in writing at the end of a chapter in social studies or science or following a selection in the literature anthology. Unfortunately, most of those questions are low level and fail to match the rigor called for in the new standards.

A better approach is to identify the richest question and tweak it to make it into a writing prompt or build a prompt around a new challenging discussion question. When students write for a variety of rigorous topic-specific tasks over time, as called for in the new standards, they learn more, think more, and write better.

Introduce short research projects

Short research projects build on what students have learned from writing to one or more sources, as students gradually become more proficient in their use of sources and improve their research skills.

It is important to teach students how to take notes on sources and organize their notes in preparation for writing. Students need to understand that their notes must be targeted to the writing assignment, so they first need to examine and unpack the writing assignment so they will recognize relevant information in the sources.

Research indicates that "interactive learning questions" can guide students' reading of sources *(Proske & Kapp, 2013)*. Eventually, students should learn how to formulate their own questions, and at that point, teaching students how to do research becomes more about teaching them "to fish" than about "giving them a fish."

It is also essential to teach students how to integrate two or more sources, as called for in the new standards. When students are using multiple sources for a paper, they often have difficulty with comparative reading if different sources give different answers to a guiding question, and in this situation students tend to ignore one or both answers.

When students write for a variety of rigorous topic-specific tasks over time, as called for in the new standards, they learn more, think more, and write better.

Teachers need to help students apply critical reading skills to the conflicting sources and consider which source provides the better evidence or reasoning, or which author speaks with more authority on the issue. Hoffman's (*1992*) Inquiry chart (I-chart) is a useful graphic organizer to help students compare answers to each guiding question. It is essential for student researchers to learn how to integrate sources in their writing, especially when the sources disagree.

Conclusion

Our first concern as K–8 writing educators is to have students write and teach them how to write better. To this end, the new writing expectations are leading schools and districts to restore writing instruction after years of de-emphasis or absence from the curriculum. Good progress has been made, but we have much more to do.

A number of the new standards aim to make sure that students learn the skill of writing. (See my whitepaper, "Reimagining the Way We Teach Writing in K–5"). However, the new standards do not stop with the how of writing. They also include expectations about the what of writing. The content of writing is an essential dimension of the new standards that can be addressed by deepening and widening writing instruction to remedy the prior knowledge problem.

When we make sure that students have access to the knowledge they need before they begin a piece of writing, and when we have students regularly write to learn and conduct short research projects, we deepen and widen writing instruction to meet the full array of the new writing standards and set students firmly on the path to college and career readiness in writing.

The content of writing is an essential dimension of the new standards that can be addressed by deepening and widening writing instruction to remedy the prior knowledge problem.

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