College and Career Readiness Standards for Writing

Reimagining the Way We Teach Writing in K–5

A position paper on the historical importance of the new standards for writing, the importance of using writing as a vehicle for instruction, and strategies for supporting teachers during the transition.

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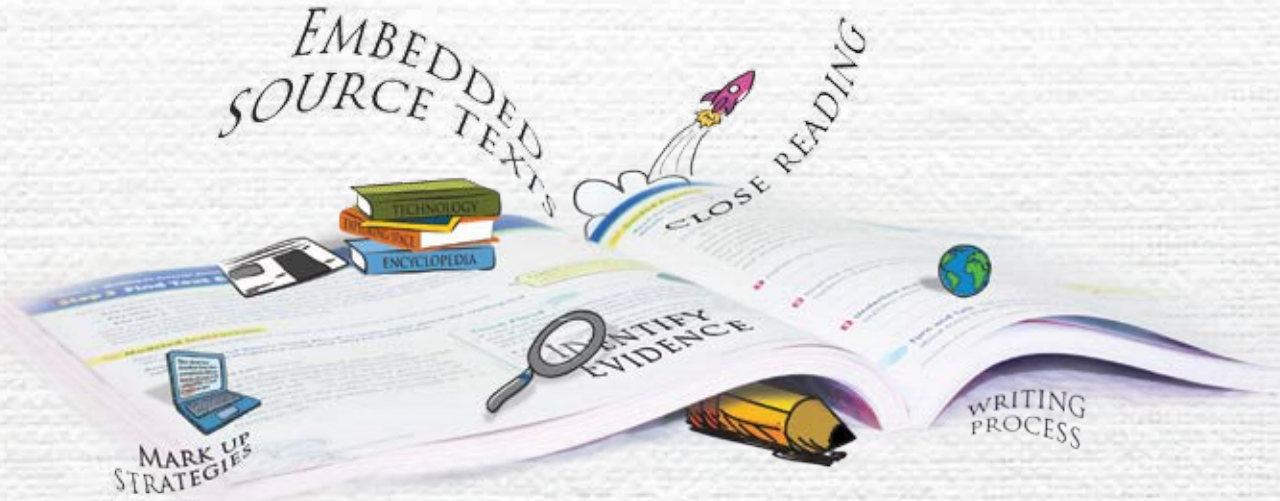

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Introduction

Writing instruction all but vanished during the No Child Left Behind era. With the introduction of the Common Core State Standards and college and career readiness standards, writing is again a main character in literacy education.

> *The new, more rigorous writing standards provide both a worthy goal and some effective means for reaching the goal…* ***the new writing expectations may be the best standards we have ever had*** *in any area of American education.*

The new standards are more rigorous and come with a realization that for students to be career and college ready in the new information economy, they must be competent readers who are also proficient writers. The workforce of the future needs to include good researchers who have the ability to select and read complex sources to answer research questions, organize and evaluate information from those sources, and write clearly and articulately about what they have found out. Productive members of this workforce must not only be able to write a narrative—a major focus of past writing instruction—but they must also have the ability to write to inform, write an opinion, and write an analysis that is clear and compelling.

The goal of this paper is to highlight how the Common Core State Standards and other college and career readiness standards like them have brought a new focus to writing instruction as well as new challenges for teachers as they teach students to both enjoy and be successful at writing. It provides a call to action for school and district leaders as they consider professional development for teachers, how to remove disincentives to improved writing instruction, and how to evaluate effective writing programs that are up to the challenge of the new, more rigorous standards.

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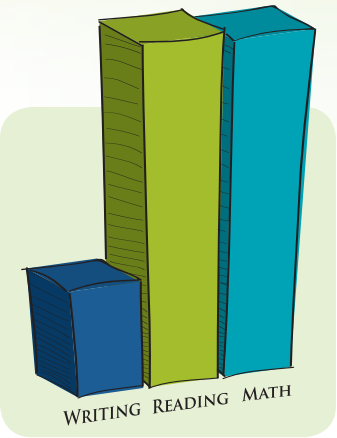

First, the Bad News

New college and career expectations (the Common Core State Standards and those like them) call for an increase in rigor in the "Three Rs." Yet, anyone who has spent much time in elementary classrooms over the past dozen years or so realizes that what we've been teaching mostly are the Two Rs. If reading, writing, and math were three horses in a race, the writing nag would long since have been left in the dust by the other two! A clear-eyed appraisal of the situation most elementary schools find themselves in leads to only one conclusion: Writing is the area of the curriculum that has the furthest to go to meet the new standards.

This state of affairs has historical causes. More than a generation ago, only a minority of people went to college and few jobs in our society required writing ability. That began to change as more students pursued higher education and more careers opened up in government and the information economy. Suddenly, an increasing proportion of well-paying jobs included the regular writing of reports, memoranda, business letters, personnel evaluations, briefs, project and grant proposals, press releases, etc. By the early 2000s, two major studies of workplace writing documented just how much employers had come to value writing ability.

If reading, writing, and math were three horses in a race, ***the writing nag would long since have been left in the dust*** *by the other two!*

The first study summarized its results this way: "A survey of 120 major American corporations employing nearly 8 million people concludes that in today's workplace writing is a 'threshold skill' for hiring and promotion among salaried (i.e., professional) employees." *(National Commission on Writing, 2004, p. 3)*

The second study condensed its findings like this: "A survey of state human resources divisions by the National Governors Association concludes that writing is considered an even more important job requirement for the states' nearly 2.7 million employees than it is for the private sector employees studied in the Commission's previous survey of leading U.S. businesses." *(National Commission on Writing, 2005, p. 3)*

In the decade since these large studies were completed, the writing demands on both public and private sector employees have almost certainly continued to grow. It is also probable that writing ability has become an expectation for a higher percentage of jobs. Still, unlike with reading or math, writing is often undervalued by those who remember the time a few decades ago when writing was not as vital to learn.

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In 2002, as these important studies were being designed and carried out, No Child Left Behind (NCLB) began setting the agenda for elementary schools to teach reading and arithmetic with no emphasis on writing. Consequently, the teaching of writing—including even handwriting and spelling instruction!—soon all but disappeared from many elementary schools. Why NCLB ignored the need for children to learn to write is a mystery, but the scripted programs, pacing guides, and assessments like the DIBELS *(Good & Kaminski, 2002)* that NCLB spawned quickly reduced writing to something "it would be nice to teach if we had time."

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When the CCSS were released in 2010, many were surprised to find that writing has been elevated to an equal status with reading and math. In ELA, there are 10 reading standards and 10 writing standards. In writing, the standards 1–3 relate to text types and purposes, 4–6 are about production and distribution of writing, 7–9 are research to build and present knowledge, and 10 is ensuring a range of different types of writing. There are three reading-related language standards (4–6), but there are also three writing-related language standards (1–3). There are speaking and listening standards that support or parallel standards in writing as well as reading. All students are expected to engage in research—which combines reading with writing—as they learn science, social studies, and literature.

To be clear, today's elementary schools have their work cut out for them in writing. The quantity and rigor of the new writing expectations are commensurate with those in reading and math. Unfortunately, the current state of writing instruction in K–5 is such that allocated instructional time and teacher expertise typically lag significantly behind those in the other two areas. Facing facts requires us to acknowledge that, in writing, there is a long way to go from where we are to where we need to be.

The 10 Common Core Writing Standards

CCSS.ELA-Literacy.CCRA.W.1
Write arguments to support claims in an analysis of substantive topics or texts using valid reasoning and relevant and sufficient evidence.

CCSS.ELA-Literacy.CCRA.W.2
Write informative/explanatory texts to examine and convey complex ideas and information clearly and accurately through the effective selection, organization, and analysis of content.

CCSS.ELA-Literacy.CCRA.W.3
Write narratives to develop real or imagined experiences or events using effective technique, well-chosen details and well-structured event sequences.

CCSS.ELA-Literacy.CCRA.W.4
Produce clear and coherent writing in which the development, organization, and style are appropriate to task, purpose, and audience.

CCSS.ELA-Literacy.CCRA.W.5
Develop and strengthen writing as needed by planning, revising, editing, rewriting, or trying a new approach.

CCSS.ELA-Literacy.CCRA.W.6
Use technology, including the Internet, to produce and publish writing and to interact and collaborate with others.

CCSS.ELA-Literacy.CCRA.W.7
Conduct short as well as more sustained research projects based on focused questions, demonstrating understanding of the subject under investigation.

CCSS.ELA-Literacy.CCRA.W.8
Gather relevant information from multiple print and digital sources, assess the credibility and accuracy of each source, and integrate the information while avoiding plagiarism.

CCSS.ELA-Literacy.CCRA.W.9
Draw evidence from literary or informational texts to support analysis, reflection, and research.

CCSS.ELA-Literacy.CCRA.W.10
Write routinely over extended time frames (time for research, reflection, and revision) and shorter time frames (a single sitting or a day or two) for a range of tasks, purposes, and audiences.

Source: *http://www.corestandards.org/ELA-Literacy/CCRA/W/*

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Now, the Good News

There are several reasons to be positive about elementary schools' renewed responsibility to teach writing. Teaching writing has advantages compared with teaching reading. Writing depends less than reading on students' home background *(Ma & Klinger, 2000)*. As a result, there may be less of a gap between the top and bottom performers in writing than in reading, especially in the elementary grades. Writing can be easier for many English learners than reading because, if they are encouraged to do so, English learners can write a hybrid of their first language and English that gradually becomes entirely English. Therefore, the amount and quality of instruction provided by a district or school can matter even more in writing than in reading. Teaching writing is an efficient use of scarce instructional time because when done well it also improves students' reading *(Graham & Hebert, 2011)* and content learning *(Graham & Perin, 2007)*.

Standards That are More Than Standards

Another reason to be enthusiastic about teaching writing in today's elementary schools is the Common Core and other similar writing standards themselves. They are a model for how more rigorous educational standards can embody both research findings and best instructional practice.

Consider writing standard 4 in the CCSS: "Produce clear and coherent writing in which the development and organization are appropriate to task, purpose, and audience" (Grades 3–5). This is not merely a standard—something students should be able to do—but it is also an elegant statement of the overall goal that can be achieved with a good writing instructional program.

CCSS writing standards 10 and 5 are also more than standards. They outline major ways to achieve the lofty, multifaceted, but concrete goal stated in writing standard 4. Standard 10 calls for writing to become routine across the school day by third grade. At that point, writing will no longer be a special event, but writing of different lengths, for varied tasks, purposes and audiences, including in the content areas, will be normal practice in classrooms.

Writing standard 5 calls for students to learn to use the writing process (planning, revision, and editing) to strengthen some of what they write. Consistent with Vygotsky's research (1978), students progressively internalize what they are taught in each phase of the writing process until it begins to show up in their first-draft writing. When what was learned previously during the writing process manifests itself in students' on-demand writing, they are ready to receive more sophisticated instruction as they continue to take selected first drafts through the writing process.

The new, more rigorous writing standards provide both a worthy goal and some effective means for reaching the goal. In fact, the new writing expectations may be the best standards we have ever had in any area of American education.

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A Framework for Teaching Writing: Using the Writing Process as a Vehicle for Instruction

As educators begin to reframe the way they think about writing instruction in the elementary grades, it will be important to use the writing ***process*** as a vehicle for instruction. Because writing is something you do, rather than something you know, the most effective writing instruction maximizes modeling, coaching, and feedback. The writing process should not be seen as a strategy or a procedure students must follow whenever they write, because many good writers have their own unique process. Rather, the writing process should be seen as a framework for ***teaching*** writing, because it allows students to focus on one aspect of writing at a time in order to learn how to do that aspect better.

Planning

Planning is the phase of the writing process that takes place before students begin to write their piece. During this time the teacher can lead them to study a mentor text, teach them to read the writing prompt closely and unpack it, or help them take notes and organize them when they are writing from sources. Once students understand an assignment and have done any research it may require, they can be encouraged to engage in individual planning to determine how their paper will be unique, i.e., different from every other student's in the class.

Revising

Research supports the use of guidelines for revision tied either to content or the type of writing they are learning how to do *(MacArthur, 2007)*. Guidelines help students evaluate their own drafts for features they lack and for opportunities to make them stronger *(Hayes, 2004)*. The CCSS and similar sets of writing standards list grade-appropriate characteristics for the principal types of writing such as opinion pieces, informational writing, and narratives. These lists, as well as other sets of grade appropriate characteristics for more specific kinds of writing such as biographies or articles, are an excellent source for revision guidelines.

*The writing process should be a framework for **teaching** writing… it allows students to focus on one aspect at a time in order to learn how to do that aspect better.*

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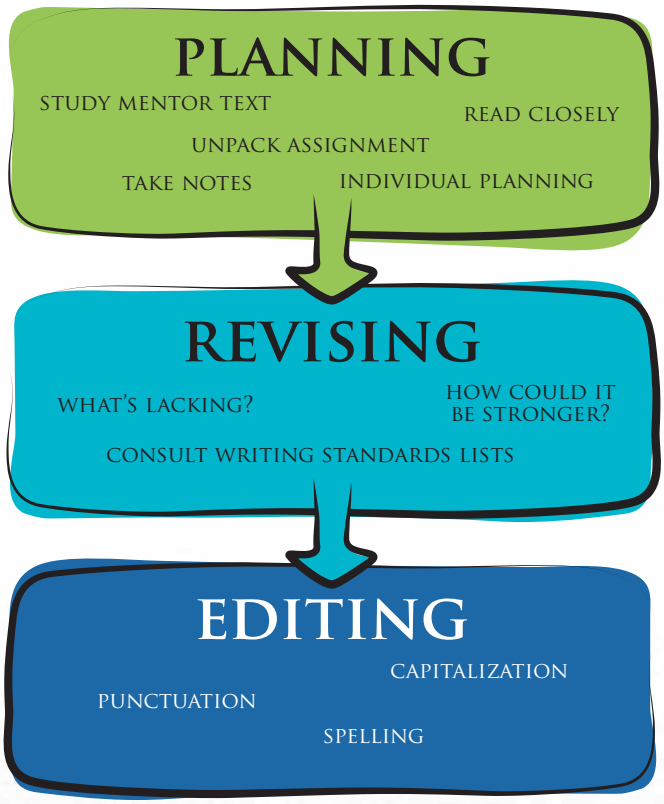
Editing

Research also supports giving students specific guidelines for editing *(Hillocks, 1986)* so they will eventually conform to those conventions when they write on-demand. CCSS and similar sets of language standards provide excellent guidelines for a checklist to direct students' editing of some of their writing for standard English usage and writing mechanics. An example of an editor's checklist for capitalization is shown at right.



Editor's Checklist

- ☐ *Capitalize the pronoun "I."*
- ☐ *Capitalize the first word in a sentence.*
- ☐ *Capitalize names of people and places.*
- ☐ *Capitalize names of days of the week, months, and holidays.*

In second grade (or a special class), start with the first convention and add one whenever the students demonstrate that they can edit for the checklist so far.

If third graders edited some last year, begin the checklist with the first two or three and add another when they are successful with the current checklist.

Remove a convention from the checklist when all students abide by it consistently in their on-demand writing.

(See grade-appropriate conventions in language standards 1–2 for conventions to gradually add to the checklist after these four.)

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Supporting Teachers: Advice for Administrators

To have effective writing instruction in every classroom requires a district- or school-wide emphasis on writing and someone to lead that effort. Some tips for leaders include: build teacher capacity in teaching writing, encourage regular formative and interim assessment, work to remove disincentives to improved writing instruction, communicate the value of writing to teachers, parents, and students, and seek out instructional materials that are rigorous enough to meet the new standards.

Build teacher capacity in teaching writing

Professional development and instructional materials that support best practices by including embedded PD are especially important in writing. Teachers with fewer than a dozen years of experience may never have taught writing in any systematic way before. Teachers with the most years of experience may retain a vision of writing from the whole-language era that lacks the rigor of the new writing standards.

Encourage regular formative and interim assessment

Like math, but unlike reading, writing has a strong behavioral aspect. Students can be observed while they write and the writing they produce can be examined for evidence of specific strengths and weaknesses. These formative assessments can pinpoint needs for targeted instruction and provide feedback on the effectiveness of the instruction so far. On-demand writing a few times per year can reveal which students are making progress and whether what has been taught is manifesting itself in first-draft writing.

Work to remove disincentives to improved writing instruction

Three disincentives hinder progress in teaching writing:

1. If the expectation is that teachers must mark and grade every piece of writing, they will have students write less and focus on the negative when they do. As with speaking, listening, and reading in the classroom, writing must be far more common than writing assessment.

2. If the expectation is that every piece of student writing will end up as a perfect draft, writing will become a lengthy chore for teachers and students, and students will depend on teachers for help instead of steadily gaining independent control of grade-appropriate conventions.

3. If the assumption is that writing only belongs in English language arts class, students will not write as much as they need to or do the writing that will increase learning in the disciplines, such as math and science.

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Communicate the value of writing to teachers, parents, and students

When taught well, writing improves reading and content learning. Students' future success in college and careers will depend in part on their writing skill. It helps for students and stakeholders to receive regular, accurate, and enthusiastic explanations about the benefits of learning to write and what the school or district is doing to promote it.

Seek out instructional materials that are rigorous enough to meet the new standards

The new standards will require administrators to conduct an audit of their current resources or have a way to evaluate new resources in order to ensure selected programs are up to the challenge of preparing students to be confident, competent writers. What follows are 9 criteria to consider when evaluating Common Core writing programs.

Evaluation Criteria for Selecting a Writing Program

Built from scratch for the new Common Core writing expectations. *It is important to confirm that the program was not repurposed from existing publisher content, but rather designed from the beginning to meet the new, more rigorous writing expectations.*

Research-based and with a gradual-release model. *Make sure the writing program you are considering using is research-based. Also, look at the instructional approach. Programs with a gradual-release instructional model will guide students through every step of the writing and research process, providing needed support, especially for reluctant writers.*

Writing from sources is the foundation of learning. *Ensure that the lessons teach students to gather and organize text-based evidence so that they can integrate it into their writing.*

Supportive and empowering for teachers. *Writing programs that have embedded professional development, including step-by-step guidance, will help teachers seamlessly implement the program into their ELA curriculum. Explicit modeling of the writing and research process for students will take pressure off teachers to be the sole "writing mentor."*

Motivating for students with opportunities for collaboration. *Programs with real-world writing assignments that encourage students to apply research and writing skills and that also provide opportunities for collaboration will motivate and encourage them.*

Includes embedded high quality texts. *Look at the quality of the mentor texts and source texts. A good writing program will include both at point of use for students.*

Integrates learning across the curriculum. *Does it integrate common grade-level science and social studies themes, building on topics teachers are already teaching?*

Provides ongoing progress monitoring. *Teachers must be able to assess students and anticipate where they may be struggling; so look for programs that provide ongoing progress monitoring support.*

Flexible for multimedia use. *Online access to the instructional resources is important to support instruction on classroom technology such as whiteboards. Teachers should also be able to access—at least digitally—cross-grade level lessons to support differentiated instruction.*

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Conclusion

Because of the Common Core and other similar sets of rigorous writing standards, we have the guidance and impetus to teach children in the elementary grades the valuable writing ability their future success in higher education and 21st century careers will require them to have. The new standards will require education leaders to think differently about how they support teacher professional development and assess writing proficiency. They will also require a re-evaluation of the very instructional resources being used in classrooms to meet the standards. This time presents teachers and administrators with tremendous opportunity to reimagine the way writing is taught.

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Jim is Professor Emeritus of Literacy Studies, University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill and is a well-known researcher and respected author with over 100 publications to his credit. He was a member of the Text Complexity Committee for the CCSS in English Language Arts and is widely known for his research around text complexity and leveled books. His work has been featured in many prominent publications, including the Journal of Literacy Research *and* Reading Research Quarterly. *He is an elected member of the IRA Reading Hall of Fame, an author of Curriculum Associates' Ready® program and a member of the i-Ready® Technical Advisory Committee.*

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