

Writing Now

A Policy Research Brief produced by the National Council of Teachers of English

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Writing in a Changing World

We write differently—often digitally—and we write more than in the past. Technological advances, changing workplace demands, and cultural shifts make writing more important than ever, especially because the way we write often predicts academic and/or job success, creates opportunities for civic participation, maintains relationships, and enhances critical thinking.

Writing instruction needs to help students meet the challenges of writing effectively for many purposes. Yet, current studies indicate that time devoted to writing instruction and research focused on writing evaluation have both decreased in the last ten years. The growing demand for good writers requires more time and attention devoted to writing instruction and assessment in order to prepare all students for a changing world.¹

Student writers enter the classroom with diverse needs and skills, including multiple languages, grammars, cultures, and extracurricular literacy practices; therefore, various approaches and assessments are necessary in order to decrease the gaps between more-advantaged and less-advantaged writers. Attention to these gaps is especially important because writing acts as a gatekeeper; weak writing skills limit school, job, and advancement opportunities.²

Research cannot identify one single approach to writing instruction that will be effective with every learner because of the diverse backgrounds and learning styles of students who respond differently to various approaches.

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Furthermore, today's students will face varied writing demands in the future. Still, current research on writing makes these things clear: Instructional practices, writing genres, and assessments should be *holistic, authentic, and varied*. This document describes research-based approaches to writing and writing instruction that aim to prepare fluent and flexible writers for writing tasks and genres we cannot yet predict.

Key Terms

Genre often refers to the category to which a text “belongs”—such as “memo,” “lab report,” or “sonnet”—because of its formal features. New conceptions of genre move beyond form to account for the ways that genre shapes social roles and identities as well as discourses. For example, a medical report uses specific terminology to position the writer as an authority dispensing knowledge and the audience as a patient passively receiving it.³

Writing across the curriculum (WAC) assumes that writing can both foster and demonstrate learning in a variety of subjects or disciplines. It emphasizes writing practices that are common, communicable, and portable as ways to encourage critical thinking and learning. Such practices include journals, in-class writing, and linked assignments. The goal is to use writing in multiple ways to prepare students for a variety of disciplinary contexts.⁴

Writing in the disciplines (WID) has much in common with WAC, but the emphasis is different. It focuses on the generic conventions, including content-specific vocabulary and what counts as evidence or as good organization in a given discipline. Students learn to write as members of specific discourse communities.⁵

Formative writing assessments are diagnostic tools that can provide feedback to teachers and students over the course of an instructional unit or term. Some common methods of formative writing assessment include commenting on drafts, soliciting peer response, and holding writing conferences.

Summative writing assessments usually take place after some instruction has occurred, and involve assigning a value (i.e., a letter grade on a final essay or portfolio, or a standardized test score) that articulates a measure of student achievement in writing.⁶

Prescriptive grammar is based on the belief that there is (or should be) a hierarchy of language usage. In this view some dialects and registers of English are privileged over others, and the less privileged ones are described as “incorrect.”⁷

Functional grammar considers the English language as it is actually used by speakers and writers in real-world contexts. Based on recent research in linguistics, instruction focused on functional grammar can enhance student understanding of the discourses of different disciplines because it shows how language evolves for different purposes in different contexts, and how variations are context-appropriate.⁸

New-media writing refers to writing associated with digital technologies such as computers, videos, podcasts, and the Internet. These technologies have the potential to make writing more fluid and facilitate the blending of visual and verbal texts. This means that new media offer new conceptual and material opportunities for writers.⁹

Common Myths about School-Based Writing

Myth: Writing assignments should be designed primarily to measure mastery of content material and writing skills.

Reality: Writing can help students understand, process, and think critically about course material. Writing assignments, then, are best designed to help students learn: by asking them first to use writing to learn about a given topic or subject, to evaluate their own understanding of that topic, and/or to develop expertise about it; then to use writing to critically analyze that understanding. In other words, teachers who create writing assignments that begin by engaging students in writing-to-learn activities set the stage for students to demonstrate in final, polished writing a fuller understanding of the topic at hand.¹⁰

Myth: Instructors across the disciplines agree on a definition for good academic writing.

Reality: While instructors can agree upon general expectations for academic writing across disciplines, the level of agreement diminishes as instructors consider writing within specific disciplines.¹¹



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Myth: Grammar drills are the most effective way to improve student writing.

Reality: Students need to understand how language works in order to become effective writers, and this is best accomplished by instruction that focuses on a context-based functional approach that illustrates how parts of language work together to create meaning.¹²

Myth: Genre refers only to formal features of writing.

Reality: Genres are shaped by site-specific understandings shared by insiders. The differing purposes and audiences of genres privilege and exclude certain information and perspectives. Writing instruction, then, would benefit from deep study of genre considerations.¹³

Myth: One-time high stakes assessments of writing are the best way to determine students' preparation for college.

Reality: College admissions tests, such as the ACT and SAT, have recently incorporated one-time, high-stakes timed-writing portions as either optional or mandatory. However, research shows that these high-stakes timed-writing samples are often ineffective or incomplete indicators of student ability and capability for college work. Misuse and misunderstanding of the results of standardized tests of writing is common, which may lead to inequalities in admission to colleges and graduate programs, especially for traditionally underrepresented groups. Consequently, most admissions programs weigh multiple factors to evaluate preparation for college.¹⁴

Myth: New-media writing simply transfers traditional writing practices into a digital environment.

Reality: Research shows that digital technologies shape and are shaped by processes of writing. Furthermore, the infrastructure requirements of new-media writing have an influence on many aspects of composing because factors like bandwidth, screen size, and software constraints all shape what writers can and cannot do. Accordingly, new media writing requires modified processes of composing.¹⁵

Understanding Writing Now

Overview: Dimensions of Writing Now

Writing, especially at the present moment, is complex and difficult to define. It is used for multiple purposes and is addressed to many different audiences. Yet we do know some important things about writing: it is not created by a singular, linear process; it cannot be taught, like bike riding, as a single skill; it changes with shifting technologies—like today's new media; it can enable and enhance learning; it takes many forms; and it cannot be assessed effectively in a single sitting. All this means that writing can be seen as holistic, authentic, and varied. Approaching writing as *holistic* acknowledges the nature of writing development, treats writing as an ongoing process, and considers aspects of writing (such as grammar and punctuation) as parts of a whole. Approaching writing as *authentic* means seeing it in real-world terms, creating assignments that connect with students' lived experiences, providing adequate time for writing projects, and evaluating it with multiple measures that consider audience and purpose. Approaching writing as *varied* means fostering heterogeneous writing skills—such as collaborative and technology-based writing activities—in various genres and disciplines.

Writing is . . . *Holistic*:

Effective writing instruction and assessment incorporates many different facets of writing that have traditionally been taught in isolation, including grammar, syntax, spelling, mechanics, and even stages in the writing process. In contrast, teaching many of these facets, including grammar, in context can be very effective. Current research suggests that a holistic approach to instruction and assessment will give students the tools they need to develop as writers. A holistic approach sees writing as a multidirectional and

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multifaceted activity and attempts to teach and assess the many disparate aspects of writing in a connected fashion.

The holistic approach avoids separate or isolated grammar instruction.

- An exclusive focus on grammar instruction and grammar-related assessments can distract students and teachers from the entire range of features that constitute effective writing.¹⁶
- Research shows that explicit teaching of grammar using a context-based functional approach, which focuses on how words, phrases, and sentences work together to make meaning can help basic writers and English language learners improve their writing.¹⁷
- Employers who place high value on accuracy, clarity, and usage in workplace writing also value rhetorical features such as persuasive appeals to a real audience, and they often expect employees to participate in collaborative construction of written texts.¹⁸

The holistic approach regards the “process model” of writing as flexible.

- Writing does not proceed in linear fashion from pre-writing to drafting to revising. The revision practices of students become more effective when instructors help them to see that revision occurs at every stage of the writing process. Students benefit from a metacognitive understanding of revision; rather than just learning steps in a process, they should constantly reflect upon their own writing performances.¹⁹
- Most teachers say they use a “process” approach to writing instruction, and students demonstrate familiarity with process tasks. However, research shows that the implementation of process approaches is flexible and varies from one classroom to another.²⁰
- Students who create high quality writing plans, often involving reflection or awareness of their own thinking as well as personal goals for writing, produce stronger papers. Teachers can help students with this process by examining and responding to prewriting as well as drafts.²¹
- When students are given explicit instructions in writing they can develop the ability to monitor and modify their own writing processes and this, in turn, improves the quality of their writing. Such instruction can include strategies like goal-setting and self-monitoring, which lead students to write longer, more developed, and qualitatively stronger texts.²²

Writing is . . . Authentic:

The twenty-first century demands that literate people possess a wide range of writing skills and varying approaches to writing tasks. Writers need to understand and respond to many different rhetorical situations, addressing multiple audiences for a variety of purposes. Research shows how teachers can adjust their approaches to teaching and assessing writing in order to prepare students to meet real-world writing challenges.

Authentic writing takes place in a real-world context and addresses real-world needs.

Writing can serve as both a means of access and as a barrier to opportunity. Those who write effectively have an advantage in applying to college, seeking employment, or earning promotions. They can also use writing to think through ideas and assimilate new information. However, writing can also act as a gatekeeper because those with weak writing skills face limitations on what they can achieve in schooling and the world of work. Effective writers know how to deal with a wide variety of genres. Within a single day, an individual’s writing tasks might include genres such as academic papers, technical reports, memos, personal reflections, emails, visual and oral presentations, notes on reading, and research documents.²³

- The 21st century requires writers who can move easily between genres, think critically about new writing tasks, exercise audience awareness, and be able to identify and improve areas of weakness.²⁴
- Digital technologies influence the processes, circulation, and evaluation of writing, and students need to learn how to work effectively with them.²⁵
- Inquiry-based writing connects writing practices with real-world experiences and tasks; it also increases student engagement. Research shows that authentic writing involving analysis and interpretation is related to increased writing achievement.²⁶

Authentic writing instruction affirms the importance of collaboration.

Although writing is often portrayed as an isolated activity, it has many social dimensions, and effective teachers provide students opportunities to experience writing in interactive terms by encouraging students to work together at every stage of the writing process.

- Struggling writers benefit from a combination of self-evaluation and peer evaluation; this helps them to

appropriate higher writing standards, develop self-regulation skills, and view writing as both an individual and collaborative activity.²⁷

- Students who have access to computers for writing often move easily into collaborative arrangements with other writers and find electronic support for their work with others.²⁸
- Opportunities to work with peers in prewriting and drafting as well as revising enables students to develop a strong sense of audience as well as a more fully developed understanding of voice in writing.²⁹

Authentic writing instruction gives careful attention to assessment.

The most effective assessment of writing occurs within the context of instruction. The growing presence of one-time writing assessments on high-stakes standardized tests has a negative effect on writing instruction because they are disconnected from instruction and provide little or no useful feedback to teachers or students. Research has shown that an overreliance on standardized testing, especially in K–12 education, often harms students’ daily experience of learning and displaces more substantive approaches to the curriculum.

- Skill in writing is developed and refined through practice, which means students should have frequent opportunities to write and receive formative assessment such as comments on a draft, peer response, or suggestions for revision.³⁰
- An authentic understanding of writing assessment based in research shows that a carefully organized system of classroom documentation of student learning, through portfolios or other methods of collecting student work samples, is the most useful for demonstrating student writing achievement.³¹
- Quality feedback that asks students to develop their writing and expand their ideas results in improvement. Surface-level feedback focused on grammar and spelling does not encourage students to develop their writing or thinking.³²

Authentic writing instruction helps students use new technologies effectively.

Writing has always depended upon some technology—scrolls, quills, printing presses, or ballpoint pens. These days writing is increasingly occurring in digital form, and the new media technologies of the digital environment shape writing. Today’s students need to learn how to use images, graphic design, and social networking software to compose and represent their ideas.

- Students who use computers while writing show more engagement and motivation and produce written work of greater length and higher quality.³³
- New media classrooms help to encourage more collaborative literacy processes.³⁴
- The merging of visual and verbal texts is a feature of new-media writing that requires teachers and students alike to rethink concepts like “content” and “information.”³⁵

Writing is . . . *Varied:*

Effective instruction prepares students for a wide variety of writing. Just as writing varies in multiple ways, so too do writers. Different aspects of writing tasks pose unique challenges for different kinds of learners. From English language learners to students with disabilities to students at various levels of development and maturity, writers demonstrate a wide variety of abilities, strengths, and challenges. It is important to recognize that students, as their literacy levels emerge and grow, are often at different points in a single classroom.

A varied approach sees writing as a way of learning and gives students many opportunities to explore ideas with writing.

- Writing assignments can enhance content area learning through writing-to-learn activities which use writing as a means to explore new information.³⁶
- Studies show that maturing writers develop authority in stages, using these stages to write themselves into positions of expertise. Emerging writers often imitate and repeat scholarship before they can analyze and question it.³⁷
- In both WAC and WID programs, instructors and researchers increasingly recognize the need to foster and scaffold students’ ability to identify and employ discipline-specific features of writing. For example, research indicates that students who recognize their novice position within a discipline, and who see the need to develop into experts, improve their writing abilities more than students who adhere to the familiar writing formulas and conventions.³⁸

A varied approach recognizes many different contexts and purposes for writing.

- Each discipline has content-specific knowledge, and students need to learn how to use this knowledge in their writing. Students benefit from being actively

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encouraged to see formal and linguistic features of the texts as emerging from and responding to the disciplinary and social purpose of communication.³⁹

- The numerous, varied writing tasks students confront depend on specific skills and knowledges. Students need to be able to effectively write for a range of purposes, content areas, and workspaces.⁴⁰
- Having to explicitly discuss and articulate particular genre decisions can help students to transfer knowledge into various disciplines and can help lessen the achievement gap.⁴¹
- Research shows that from early developmental years to graduate student courses, students' explicit knowledge of the features and expectations of specific genres increases authentic and purposeful engagement with writing and reading.⁴²

Research-Based Recommendations for Effective Writing Instruction and Assessment

For Teachers

- Require all students—especially the less experienced ones—to write extensively so that they can be comfortable writing extended prose in elementary school, and a minimum of five-page essays in high school and ten-page essays in college.⁴³
- Create writing assignments that ask students to interpret and analyze in a wide variety of genres.⁴⁴
- Employ functional grammar approaches to help students understand how language works in a variety of contexts.⁴⁵
- Foster collaborative writing processes.⁴⁶
- Make new-media writing part of students' regular composing.⁴⁷
- Use strategies of formative assessment to give students feedback on developing drafts.⁴⁸
- Employ multiple measures, including portfolios, to provide summative assessments of students' development as writers.⁴⁹

For Schools

- In hiring instructors, be sure that their professional education has included coursework in writing instruction.⁵⁰
- Develop authentic assessments of writing that bridge the gaps between school and workplace writing, and be sure to include multiple measures of writing proficiency, such as portfolios.⁵¹
- Create curricula that foster writing in every subject at every grade level.⁵²
- Build a technological infrastructure to support new-media writing.⁵³
- Invest in professional development for writing instructors.⁵⁴

For Policymakers

- Develop programs for professional development in writing instruction for teachers at all levels.⁵⁵
- Encourage and fund studies that bridge the gaps between qualitative and quantitative research on writing; between research in composition studies and in teacher education; between school and workplace writing; and among writers at varying developmental and skill levels.⁵⁶
- Provide funding for both technological and professional development support of new-media writing.⁵⁷

Further Resources Online

NCTE Beliefs about the Teaching of Writing, and Resources for Writing in Grades K–8

<http://www.ncte.org/prog/writing/research>

CCCC Statement on the Multiple Uses of Writing

<http://www.ncte.org/cccc/resources/positions/128812.htm>

Writing Assessment: A Position Statement

<http://www.ncte.org/cccc/resources/positions/123784.htm>

The Impact of the SAT and ACT Timed Writing Tests: Report from the NCTE Task Force on SAT and ACT Writing Tests (April 2005)

http://www.ncte.org/library/files/About_NCTE/Press_Center/SAT/SAT-ACT-tf-report.pdf

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