A Snapshot of Writing Instruction in Middle Schools and High Schools

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There have been many changes in policies and practices influencing the teaching of writing over the past 30 years—the advent of high-stakes testing, the press for evidence-based practice, and the availability of new technologies for writing and research. However, we have very little evidence about the extent to which such changes have influenced actual classroom practice. We began the four-year National Study of Writing Instruction (NSWI) with this concern in mind. In the May 2009 issue of *English Journal,* we reported on our analysis of data from the National Assessment of Educational Progress to provide a first look at changes in the teaching of writing over the past 30 years. In this article, we provide a more detailed look, drawing on data collected from visits to 260 English, math, social studies, and science classrooms in 20 middle schools and high schools in five states (schools all chosen for reputations for excellence in the teaching of writing), interviews with 220 teachers and administrators, and with 138 students in these schools, and a national survey of 1,520 randomly selected teachers.

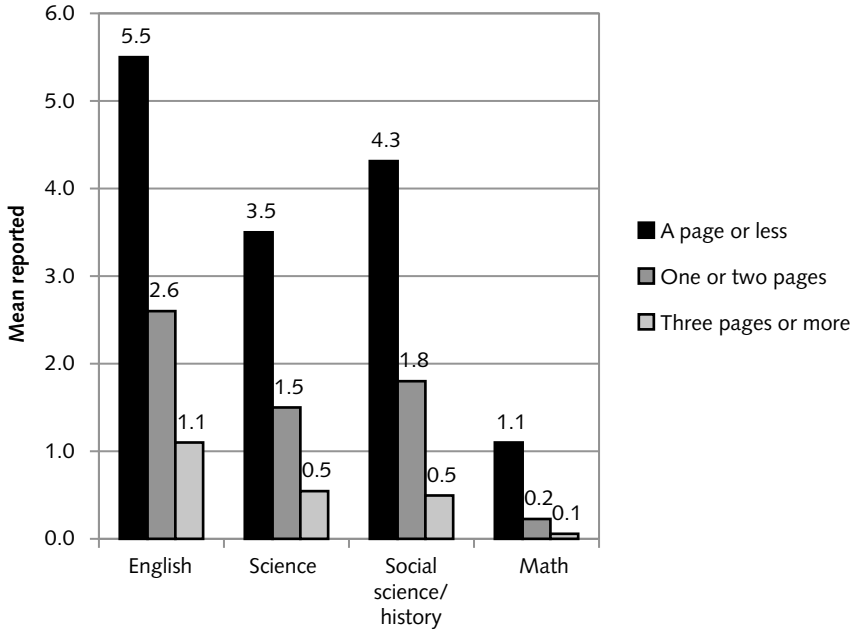
A full description of methods and procedures for the various phases of the National Study is available at http://albany.edu/cela. The most recent extensive previous study of writing instruction is Applebee's *Writing in the Secondary School: English and the Content Areas,* based on data collected during the 1979–80 school year. The earlier study combined case studies of writing across the curriculum in two contrasting high schools with a national survey of writing across the curriculum. The results of that study indicate that writing instruction 30 years ago was a relatively simple affair: the typical assignment consisted of a few sentences setting out a topic, given in class and finished up for homework. Students were expected to write a page or less, to be graded by the teacher. Almost no class time was given over to writing instruction, or even to introducing the assignment. When students were asked to write, the teacher took an average of just over three minutes to introduce the assignment, answer the inevitable procedural questions (How many pages? Single or double spaced? Can it be in pencil?), and ask the students to start writing (Applebee 74).

Things have changed since 1980, but in what ways and how much? That is the focus of this article, for which we analyzed the amount of writing currently required, the audiences for student work, the impact of high-stakes tests, the approaches to writing instruction, and the impact of technology in the core subject areas in middle schools and high schools across the United States. Because so much has changed over the 30 years, the present article addresses a number of issues in curriculum and instruction that were not salient in the earlier study. The discussion to follow will make comparisons over time when possible, using findings from the current study to provide a baseline for understanding present practice.

How Much Writing Do Students Do?

Figure 1 summarizes teachers' estimates of the amount of extended writing that students do during a typical grading period in each of the four core academic subjects: English, social science/history, science, and math. (The data are pro-rated to the

FIGURE 1. Writing Assignments in a Nine-Week Grading Period



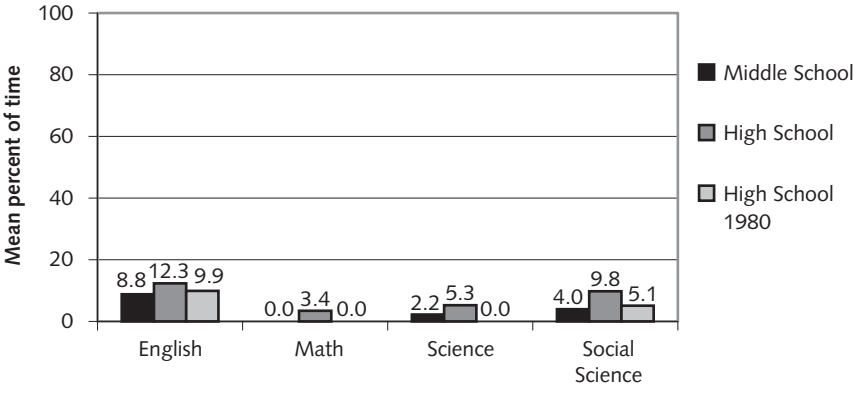
nine-week grading period that was most typical in the schools we studied.) There are several interesting things to notice in this figure. First, students write more for their English classes than for any other subject, and at the same time, they write more for their other subjects combined than they do for English. For papers of a page or less, for example, teachers report requiring 5.5 papers for English during a nine-week grading period, and a total of 8.9 for the other three classes. The differences are smaller for papers of one or two pages (2.6 for English versus 3.5 for the others combined) or three or more pages (1.1 versus 1.1), but the pattern holds. Clearly, writing goes beyond the purview of the English teacher; students' experiences across the curriculum are likely to have an important impact on how they write and the qualities that they consider important in their writing.

Further, these figures suggest that even in English class, on average, students are not writing a great deal. Combining all three types of papers in Figure 1, the typical student would be expected to produce approximately 1.6 pages a week of extended prose for English, and another 2.1 pages for the other three subjects combined. The numbers are particularly low for assignments of three or more pages, the kinds of writing where students might be expected to engage with the discipline-specific arguments and evidence called for by the Common Core Standards (Council of Chief State School Officers and National Governors Association).

The amount of extended writing seems particularly limited when viewed against how students spend the rest of their time. Of the 8,542 separate assignments that we gathered from 138 case study students in these schools (a sampling of all of their written work in the four core content areas during a semester), only 19% represented extended writing of a paragraph or more; all the rest consisted of fill in the blank and short answer exercises, and copying of information directly from the teacher's presentation—types of activities that are best described as writing without composing. (Results were similar for middle school and high school students, with 20.9% and 17.6% of their work, respectively, involving extended writing.)

Classroom observations found a similar emphasis, with students completing written work of one sort or another much of the time, but very little of it involving extended writing. Figure 2 presents information on how much time was devoted to writing of at least paragraph length across subjects, and compares it to similar data from high schools in 1979–80. Averaging across the four core subjects in 1979–80, 3.8% of observed class time was devoted to extended writing (writing a paragraph or

FIGURE 2. Writing of Paragraph Length or More during Classroom Observations



more), compared with 7.7% in the present study. It is interesting that in all subjects, there is somewhat more time devoted to writing in the classes in the current study, and more in high school than in middle school, even though the overall amount of time devoted to writing remains distressingly low. (In math and science, there was no class time devoted to extended writing in the earlier study.)

Even in the case study schools, selected for their emphasis on writing instruction, some of the teachers commented that there was less writing going on than might be expected:

> I've only been here three years. I was relatively shocked at the little amount of writing that was done. I've been pretty disappointed. I'm a Writing Project kind of kid, and I got here and like writer's workshop and they're like, "What are you talking about?" (Grade 12 English teacher)

Another teacher hinted at some of the constraints that limit the amount of writing assigned, during an interview with a visiting field researcher:

> Well, I can't have them write two paragraphs every day because that will take me how much time to read and if I can't read it and give them thoughtful feedback, it's not very productive. I've collected exit tickets and if I don't read them and have some feedback by the next day, its value decreases. Unless I know I can give them valuable and specific feedback, I think kids can perceive when it's wasting their time, so making sure that it is clearly relevant and they know it's being read is important . . . twice a week is a good amount of practicing. . . .
>
> Each student has a spiral, they take notes, they do warm-ups, I'll give them question prompts, they'll put worksheets in there, so everything is clipped in the spiral and I'll grade it about once a week and that is on top of the exit tickets. I don't really do essays very much. I do mostly paragraphs and outlines. (High school World History teacher)

Overall, in comparison to the 1979–80 study, students are writing more in all subjects, but that writing is short, not providing students with opportunities to use composing as a way to think through the issues, to show the depth or breadth of their knowledge, or to go beyond what they know in making connections and raising new issues.

Who Reads What Students Write?

Much of the emphasis in improving writing instruction over the past several decades has focused on providing authentic tasks that would be read by responsive audiences, instead of emphasizing the teacher-as-examiner. Teachers in 1979–80 and again in the present study were asked directly about who would read the writing from a typical class. Their responses show a noticeable shift over time, with students today being considerably more likely to have teachers respond to work without assigning a grade (as part of what James Britton and his colleagues called a teacher-learner dialogue); the percent of high school teachers in the four core subjects reporting reacting without grading rose from 11.8 to 20.0 across these 30 years, and is even higher in middle school (35.2%).

Students today are also considerably more likely to be asked to share their work with other students (see fig. 3). Over half of middle school and 44% of high school English teachers reported frequently or very frequently asking students to share work with other students; in the earlier study, only 16% reported regularly asking students to share their work. Similar increases are apparent in responses from science and social studies teachers, though they are clearly less enthusiastic than their peers in the English department. Some 8.2% of high school English teachers in the present study also reported frequently providing other audiences, compared with only 3.6% in the earlier study. Middle school teachers were somewhat more likely to provide such audiences, with 11.1% reporting audiences ranging from parents and trusted adults to school administrators to community-based clubs, local professionals, or school magazines.

Even with the changes that have taken place over time, however, the large majority of the writing students do is still to the teacher-as-examiner.

What Is the Effect of High-Stakes Tests?

That we teach in an era of high-stakes tests is more than obvious, but what can we say about the effects of such testing on the teaching of writing? At the middle school level, 80.8% of the teachers of English and 78.8% of teachers of math reported that the students in a typical class would take a high-stakes tests *this year*; the comparable figures were 40.2% for science and 35.8% for social science/history. At the high school level, 47.8% of the English teachers and 70.2% of the math teachers reported a high-stakes test *this year,* compared with 56.1% in science and 41.4% in social science/history classes. For most subjects, three-quarters or more of the teachers at both levels reported their students would face a high-stakes test in their subject *in this or a later* year. The only exception was for social science/history, where only 57.9% at middle school and 49.5% at high school expected their students to have to take a high-stakes exam in their subject.

When asked about the importance of various external exams in shaping curriculum and instruction, the state exam was rated as important or very important by 85.7% of the teachers at middle school, followed by district exams (63.6%). At the high school level, state exams again topped the list, rated as important or very important by 65.6%, followed by district exams (47.7%), SATs and ACTs (45.7%), and Advanced Placement or International Baccalaureate exams (30.4%).

Unfortunately, the importance placed on these exams does not augur well for the teaching of writing. Another series of questions asked what percent of the grade on the high-stakes test would be based on open-ended responses of any sort. The responses are summarized in Figure 4 and make it clear that relatively little writing is required even in English (an average of 30.3% of the high-stakes grade in high school, only 17.8% in middle school). These numbers are of particular concern because they include *any* open-ended responses, from single sentences to whole essays, as well as show-your-work

FIGURE 3. Audiences for Student Work: Other Students

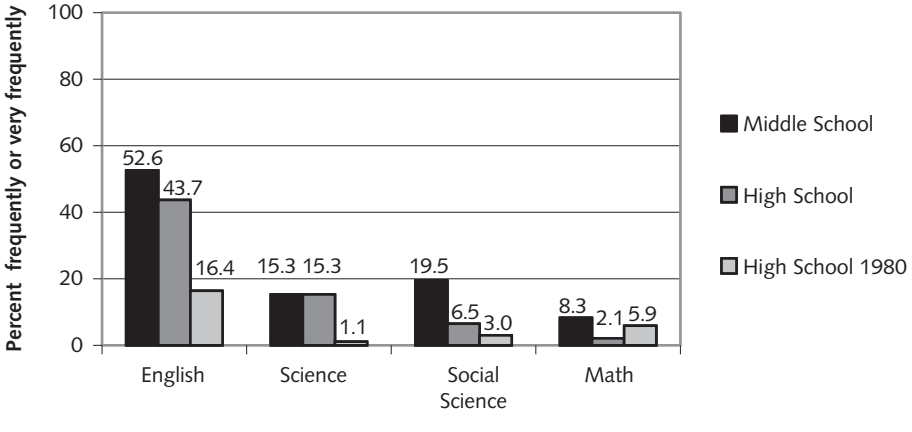
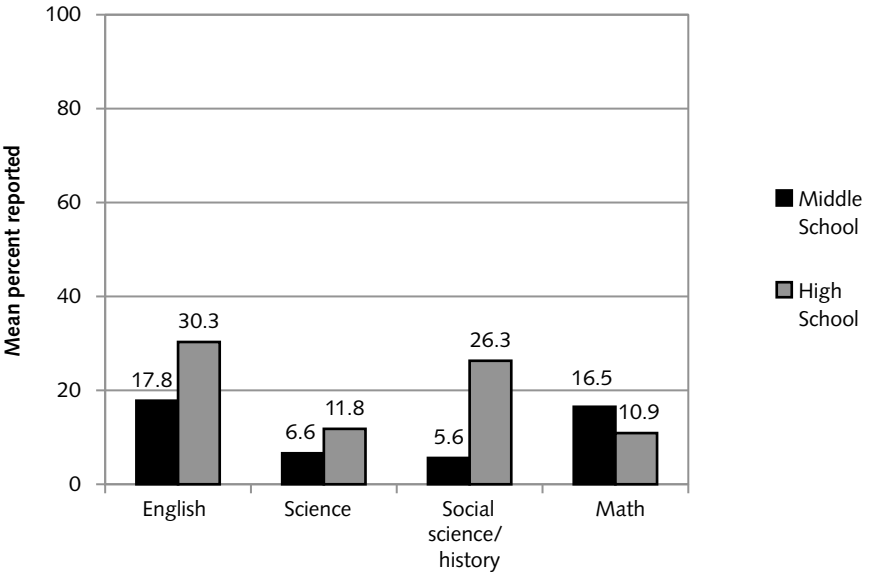


FIGURE 4. Percent of High-Stakes Grade Based on Open-Ended Responses



and explain-your-problem-solving tasks in math and science. Even including these abbreviated tasks, the use of writing as a way to demonstrate content knowledge or disciplinary thinking is minimal.

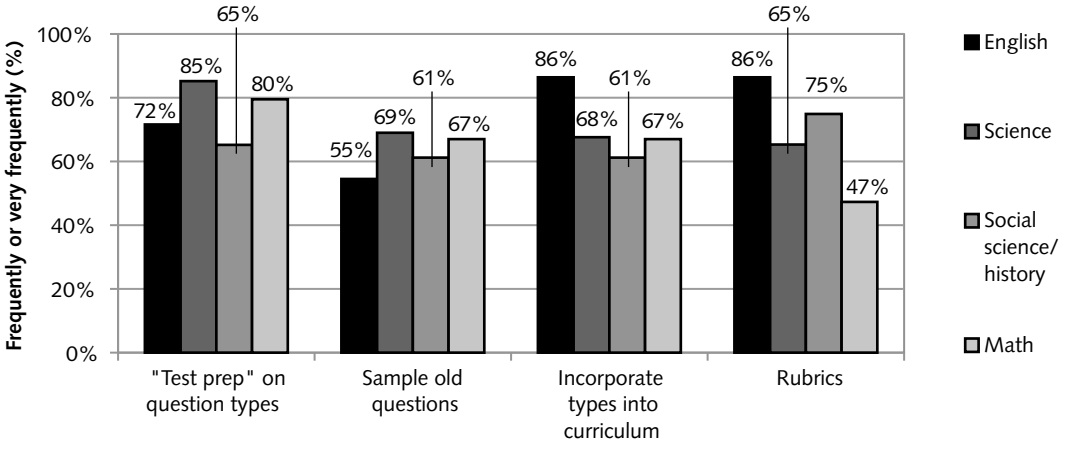
English end-of-course exams, in contrast to high-stakes external exams, gave slightly more emphasis to extended writing. Teachers reported that 24.4% of the total grade in middle school, and 41.1% in high school, would be based on writing of at least paragraph length. But even these somewhat higher numbers mean that writing on average matters less than multiple choice or short answer questions in assessing performance in English. (Percentages for the other three subjects did not differ noticeably from those for the high-stakes exams.)

Some teachers, in fact, were quite explicit about aligning their own testing with the high-stakes exams their students would face:

> Every test, no exclusions, is a mini version of the AP exam; meaning it is structured in the same way. It's half multiple choice, it's half free response. On every test, they have 15 multiple choice questions, each worth 4 points, that's a total of 60 points, and they have 4 free response questions, each worth 15 points, a total of 60. So there is a total of 120 points and then I scale it from there. The free response questions are where the writing part comes into play—a free response question is a statement of a situation and then an asking of certain questions about that situation and they have to explain their solutions, their responses to those questions. They have to write it in a cogent, coherent fashion. . . . That's the manner in which that writing component occurs and it's on every single test. That's deliberate, because what I wanted them to do, right from the get go, right from day one, was to get used to the format that they would have to face at the end of the year. (High school math teacher, discussing AP statistics)

When asked how they prepare students for the high-stakes tests they face, teachers reported heavy emphasis on some familiar types of test preparation, including frequent or very frequent "test prep" on the particular types of question that appear on the exam, and using sample questions from old exams or commercial practice materials that present similar items (see fig. 5). They similarly reported making frequent use of rubrics or scoring systems similar to those that will be used on the exam, and of incorporating the types of writing from the exam in the regular curriculum (rather than providing "test prep"). Although the provision of rubrics and the use of curriculum standards and assessments to align the curriculum can both be valuable strategies (see Langer, *Getting to Excellent*), on balance the teachers' responses suggest that high-stakes tests are having a very direct and limiting effect on classroom emphases. And given the dearth of writing required on most tests, this creates a powerful momentum away from the teaching of writing.

FIGURE 5. Test-Prep for High-Stakes Tests



On another question, some 55.1% of English teachers reported frequent practice in timed, on-demand writing, another seeming response to the writing tasks that are included on some high-stakes tests. Such tasks were less frequent in subjects that were less likely to have on-demand essay questions: 23.8% for social science/history, 17.1% in science, and 11.5% in math.

One teacher described the effects of the tests on the curriculum in her school:

> Yes, CAHSEE (California High School Exit Examination) radically changed the way teachers teach. It has an on-demand writing task, not timed, but it functions as timed because the test is so long and boring that students can't continue with it forever. Before we didn't focus on timed writing until the 11th grade—so now we include timed writing in 10th grade—in English and social studies. (High school English teacher)

Others described how "what counts" on the exam, perhaps unintentionally, influenced curriculum and instruction. The following comments are typical:

> There is not an emphasis on writing in the science state exams. I tell them not to write in complete sentences but bullet because it is more important to answer every question than to answer it well. They aren't checking how the sentence is written or structure. Spelling is not counted . . . length doesn't count. Most of the answers are bulleted. . . . The exam is three hours. If they did it any other way they would be there all day. (Eighth-grade science teacher)

> I used to do a research project but don't do it anymore because of the emphasis on tests. Research projects are so much more time intensive—go to bare bones to prepare for tests. (Eighth-grade history teacher)

> The exams have made me get rid of more writing . . . it gets to the point where you're testing on your curriculum . . . we stick to the unit, do the problems . . . a lot of the processing is skipped. They have to learn the answers, not the steps . . . and I have to address the curriculum. (Middle school math teacher)

The effects of examinations were not all bad, however; schools that focused on the International Baccalaureate or certain Advanced Placement examinations found that the exams increased their attention to writing:

> Because we're an IB school, there is a big emphasis on students being able to reflect their learning; to reflect in some type of way that they have learned something. So there is a big emphasis on writing that reflection. So they're getting writing in all their classes; not just in the language arts class. I see there's that big push as a requirement and also as a necessity for the students for us to know whether they understand by the writing and for them to be able to express that understanding in their writing. (Sixth-grade language arts teacher)

> I guess 15 years ago, I would never have asked my kids to justify anything; it was just an answer, and I graded it. And now, I am trying to get them to be able to validate what their answer is and be able to put it into words so that they can support it. Just

> a basic skill that everyone needs to be able to support their arguments. I do think that has changed. I think one of the main influences in that has been the AP test, probably. (High school math chair)

And some changes in state exams do seem to be reinforcing the place of writing in the curriculum:

> Writing is quite significant in geometry because students are writing proofs. They have to communicate their thoughts through their written language. They are constantly writing down reasons for why they are doing what they're doing; they're explaining themselves using written language. The recent switch in the [New York State] Regents curriculum to include the communication piece is playing out in the classroom. In geometry, writing and reading and language are really interwoven in the curriculum. I'd have to say you couldn't really teach geometry without the written part. In that way it's different than algebra, where incorporating language would be a little different. (Tenth-grade math teacher)

In the earlier study, carried out during 1979–80, pressure from external exams was nonexistent. Norm-referenced standardized tests were used to assess the progress of individual students, but they were not tied to the curriculum and did not carry high stakes for schools and teachers. In the current study, for better or for worse, external examinations are driving many aspects of curriculum and instruction.

What Kinds of Writing Instruction Do Teachers Emphasize?

For classes that were asked to do any writing of at least paragraph length, teachers were asked about their typical approaches to the teaching of writing. Responses are summarized in Table 1, in order of decreasing emphasis in English classes.

Teachers of all subjects reflected a concern with being clear about what is expected in particular types of writing assignments. The most frequent emphasis in all four subject areas was to clearly specify the specific parts that must be included (ranging from 94.4% of English teachers to 69.4% of math teachers); this was paralleled with an across-subject emphasis on providing rubrics

TABLE 1. Approaches to Writing Instruction in Classes that Assign Writing of at Least Paragraph Length

	PERCENT OF TEACHERS REPORTING FREQUENTLY OR ALMOST ALWAYS			
	English (n = 176)	Science (n = 117)	Social Science/ History (n = 155)	Math (n = 71)
Clearly specify the specific parts that must be included in a particular kind of writing assignment	94.4	82.0	79.4	69.4
Spend class time generating and organizing ideas or information before writing	90.6	37.5	60.7	25.2
Teach specific strategies for planning, drafting, revising, and organizing written work	90.1	29.0	41.4	28.4
Provide models of effective responses for students to read, analyze, and emulate	84.6	36.7	56.2	36.9
Provide rubrics that highlight the characteristics of good responses	82.2	59.0	62.6	51.6
Ask students to work together to plan, edit, or revise their work	60.4	37.6	40.1	44.2
Base writing on inquiry tasks involving immediate, concrete data as the basis for writing	44.4	68.3	42.6	36.8
Organize a "workshop" environment in which students receive individual attention as they engage in learning the content, allowing for cycles of investigation, writing, and revision	43.9	16.2	12.9	8.4

that highlight the characteristics of a good response (ranging from 82.2% of English teachers to 51.6% of math teachers). English teachers reinforced this through the use of models of effective responses for students to read and analyze (84.6%), as to a lesser extent did social science/history teachers (56.2%).

Process-oriented writing instruction was obvious in English classes (90.6% frequently spending class time on generating and organizing ideas before writing, and 90.1% teaching specific strategies for planning, drafting, revising, and organizing), and to a lesser extent in social science/history (60.7% reporting class time on generating and organizing ideas before writing, and 41.4% teaching specific strategies).

Collaborative work remains less popular than teacher-led activities. Some 60.4% of English teachers reported frequently having students work together on their writing, and 43.9% reported organizing a workshop environment. Both approaches were less popular in other subject areas.

The following notes from a classroom observation illustrate how some of these emphases came together in a twelfth-grade social studies class to support students' revisions of their work:

> Teacher opened class explaining that their "Privacy Project Portfolios" were due next week. Today they'd have the opportunity to do a Gallery Walk . . . and give feedback (using feedback forms and rubrics) on portfolios before they're turned in.
>
> Teacher outlined what the 1–5 scale meant in more specific terms. Rubrics clearly defining 1–5 are posted in the back of the room and also distributed for reference during the Gallery Walk. After expectations have been clearly outlined, students begin their Gallery Walk with their small groups, evaluating all projects except their own. Groups will then receive the feedback from the rest of the class in order to make revisions before the project is due.
>
> Students are heard intensively (but quietly) reviewing the criteria rubric, trying to come to consensus on what an appropriate score will be for each section. Students are clearly actively engaged in the process, and the discussions and process seem familiar to them. The teacher was left free to monitor small groups, and have one-on-one discussions as needed regarding the evaluation/feedback process. Students were comfortable and familiar with the rubric, so much of Ms. H's time was spent observing and "listening in." She would occasionally step in and ask some pointed questions in order to elicit thinking about the rubric and the process.
>
> At the end of class they were able to briefly discuss, when they gave a 1, why they gave a 1. Ms. H: "Hopefully this will create a sense of urgency, that even if you thought you were done, you're not." Revision was encouraged.

As a set, these activities reflect a much more sophisticated understanding of writing instruction than was evident in 1979–80. In the earlier study, instruction took place mostly as a response to completed work, rather than as a systematic attempt to clarify the task and to provide strategies and collaborative activities that would help students complete it successfully. Only 32% of English teachers in the earlier survey, for example, reported making regular use of model responses, compared with 85% in the present study; only 37% reported brainstorming activities before writing, compared with 91% spending time on generating and organizing ideas in classrooms today.

The complication is that although teachers seem to have a better understanding of appropriate techniques to use when they assign writing, competing priorities such as test preparation constrain the amount of time given to writing instruction. Table 2 summarizes writing instruction observed during classroom observations in the 20 schools selected for local reputations for excellence in the teaching of writing. These observations represent "best case" scenarios, both in the selection of the schools and in the fact that teachers were aware that our teams of observers were interested in the teaching of writing. Even so, the percent of class time focused on any aspect of writing instruction was very small. In the English classes observed, 6.3% of time was focused on the teaching of explicit writing strategies, 5.5% on the study of models, and 4.2% on evaluating writing, including discussion of rubrics or standards. (Since multiple things were often going on at once, summing these percentages would overestimate the time devoted to writing instruction.) To put the numbers in perspective, in a 50-minute period, students would have on average just over three minutes of instruction related to explicit writing strategies, or a total of 2 hours and 22 minutes in a nine-week grading period.

TABLE 2. Writing Instruction Observed in Schools with Reputations for Excellence in the Teaching of Writing

	English (n=72 classes)	Science (n=59 classes)	Social Science/ History (n=58 classes)	Math (n=55 classes)
Classes with any writing-related instruction (%)	50.2	32.4	17.1	27.5
Percent of time emphasizing:				
Explicit writing strategies	6.3	3.0	0.7	0.0
Study of models	5.5	5.1	3.4	9.6
Rubrics or standards (evaluating)	4.2	1.5	1.6	0.9
Vocabulary	4.1	8.8	1.4	3.6
Structure and organization	3.1	0.4	0.3	0.0
Grammar or usage	1.4	0.5	0.3	0.0
Spelling	1.4	0.0	0.2	0.0

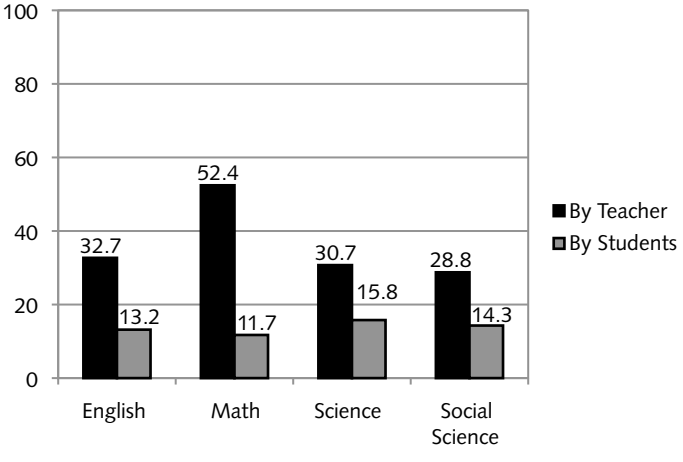
Writing-related instruction was observed most often in English classes, but the study of models was particularly popular across subject areas, while vocabulary received extra attention in science and math.

Comparable data are not available from the earlier study, which found that most writing instruction came after the fact, in teacher comments and suggestions on completed work.

How Has Technology Influenced the Teaching of Writing?

The Common Core Standards emphasize the appropriate use of technology beginning in the elementary grades, and the National Assessment of Educational Progress has begun to assess students' writing achievement using computers and word-processing software. In spite of such developments, teachers have been slow to embrace these no-longer-new technologies. Figure 6 summarizes the use of technology by students and teachers in the classrooms observed. Two things are striking in this figure. First, with the exception of math, less than a third of the classrooms made use of any technology. And second, when technology was used, it was usually used by the teacher. In fact, the technologies that were in use were primarily presentational. This is clear in a list of the types of technology in use in 5% or more of the classes observed:

FIGURE 6. Percent of Observed Classes with Technology in Use



- Overhead projector or ELMO used by the teacher (29.2% of the classes)
- PowerPoint used by the teacher (11.8%)
- Internet used by the teacher (7.7%)
- Film or video shown by the teacher (6.0%)
- Word processing used by the students (5.1%)

TABLE 3. Uses of Computers and Word Processors for Writing

	PERCENT OF TEACHERS REPORTING FREQUENTLY OR ALMOST ALWAYS			
	English (n=180)	Science (n=181)	Social Science/ History (n=181)	Math (n=146)
For finding source materials on the Internet	60.0	63.5	66.5	12.3
For writing first drafts	42.3	34.2	37.0	4.9
For embedding video, audio, or graphics in their writing	18.4	30.3	20.5	5.7
For editing and revising their own work	48.6	41.3	44.1	8.0
For sending work in progress to peers for response or editing	23.7	15.4	14.6	6.9
For final copy to hand in	75.8	56.3	59.9	12.3

Although there were isolated uses of other technologies, from social networking to Blackboard to wikis and blogs, for the most part technology seems to be reinforcing traditional patterns of teacher-centered instruction rather than opening up new possibilities. Most teachers have not embraced the notion that the use of technology in the classroom can be a powerful way to cognitively engage students in content learning.

Though instructional uses of technology were limited, teachers reported considerable use of word processing for writing. Table 3 summarizes the various uses, separately by subject area. Uses of the computer for writing are fairly similar across English, science, and social science classes, and almost nonexistent in math. Fully 75.8% of the English teachers reported that students in a typical class frequently or almost always use word processing for final copy to turn in; there was only a little variation by level, with 71.3% at middle school and 80.2% at high school. The computer is also frequently used for finding source material on the Internet. In a pattern that also appears in National Assessment data (Applebee and Langer), students seem least likely to use the computer for their first drafts (42.3% in English), somewhat more likely to use the computer for editing and revising (48.6% in English), and most likely to use it for final copy. This reflects a pattern in which students begin their writing in class without access to a computer, and copy it over later in a computer lab, the library, or at home.

Students seem to mostly use word processors as a powerful typewriter, with little embedding of video, audio, or graphics. The one exception is in science classes, where 30.3% of the teachers report their students frequently or almost always embed other material, presumably as data tables, graphs, or diagrams illustrating their work. Again, collaborative work is rare, with only 23.7% in English, and fewer in other subjects, reporting frequent sending of work in progress to peers for response or editing.

Teachers' estimates of whether students "frequently" or "almost always" use computers and word processing for the drafts they hand in tend to overestimate how much of students' work is written in this way. Of the 1,626 samples of extended writing collected from targeted students in the 20 schools with local reputations for excellence in the teaching of writing, only 23% at middle school and 42% at high school were composed on a computer. There are several reasons for the discrepancy, including the fudge factor in "frequently" and "almost always," as well as the emphasis on test preparation and test practice, which in most schools is still a paper-and-pencil activity. Indeed, some schools and districts forbid the use of word processors because these are not allowed on the relevant high-stakes tests (Russell and Abrams).

When schools have the knowledge and resources to embrace technology, the effects can be impressive. The following notes are drawn from a field researcher's interview with a middle school Humanities chair

describing the effects of technology in a school with computers in every classroom, three technology labs, computers in the library, and laptop carts:

> Whole writing process shifted with technology. Drafting made accessible, students are more likely to revise when you can just go back and fix things easier. Facilitates notion of revision. Has influenced/created different kinds of writing . . . blogging, lots of writing, real audience. Book trailers (movie trailer for books). Students still had to be concise and choose their words. Use of wikis. Lots of PowerPoint presentations. Emailing teachers is available. Email as modern day letter writing but they are doing more of it. SmartBoards in every room makes technology accessible to the whole class. Can show a website without bringing entire class to a computer lab. . . . Some teachers use it for webquests, drafting, final drafts, research.

Writing Then and Now

The snapshot of writing instruction presented here looks quite different from the picture that emerged in 1979–80. In 1979–80, students were typically provided with a question to be answered in a page or less, with instruction taking place after the fact, in the comments and responses that teachers offered on completed work. In contrast, teachers today report emphasizing a variety of research-based instructional practices (Graham and Perin), including clearly specifying what is required in a particular type of writing, teaching specific strategies for prewriting, writing, and revision, using models of successful responses for students to analyze, critique, and emulate, and treating computers and word processors as important tools that support students' learning to write.

If notions of good instruction have changed, for a variety of reasons the typical classroom does not provide much of it. In 1979–80, the majority of the writing that students completed was writing without composing—short answer or fill in the blank tasks, or copying from the board, where the resulting "text" is completely structured by the teacher or textbook. Currently that picture looks much the same, with students completing many more pages of exercises and copying than they do of original writing of even a paragraph in length. And even some of the extended writing that students do complete is constrained as practice for on-demand, timed assessments where the instruction that occurs is focused on successful test performance rather than on the development of the skills and strategies that will serve a student well in the varied tasks that make up the larger domain of writing.

We can illustrate the changes that have taken place with two examples, one drawn from the earlier study, and the other from the present one. Both are social studies tasks that ask students to deal with broad historical questions.

The question from the earlier study (see fig. 7), on the changes that occurred during the Reformation, is in many ways an impossible task, requiring book-length treatment to be handled well. It becomes a possible task only when it is seen as a request for a summary of material that has already been covered by the teacher or textbook. To do well, the students have to have learned a series of generalizations about the Reformation and must be able to repeat them in their own words; the task does not ask for original analysis or synthesis.

Now consider the task in Figure 8, on the causes of the French Revolution. Like the question from the earlier study, this is essentially a test of what students know about a particular historical period. Indeed, the instructions begin by asking them how they would answer the question based on what they have already learned. The task continues, however, providing them with a set of new source materials to analyze in light of their knowledge of the historical period and in light of the question that is posed. This is a considerably more difficult task than the earlier example, and its structure provides a variety of supports to help students complete it successfully (including some comprehension questions following each of the documents that are not presented here). Such questions are typically accompanied by a rubric that explains

FIGURE 7. A Typical Writing Task from 1979–80

> Western Europe on the eve of the Reformation was a civilization going through great changes. In a well-written essay describe the political, economic, social, and cultural changes Europe was going through at the time of the Reformation. (25 points)—(Ninth-grade social studies) (Applebee 74)

FIGURE 8. A Typical Writing Task Now

Causes of the French Revolution

Historical Context:

The French Revolution of 1789 had many long-range causes. Political, social, and economic conditions in France contributed to the discontent felt by many French people—especially those of the third estate. The ideas of the intellectuals of the Enlightenment brought new views of government and society. The American Revolution also influenced the coming of the French Revolution.

- Directions: The following question is based on the accompanying documents in Part A. As you analyze the documents, take into account both the source of the document and the author's point of view. Be sure to:
  1. Carefully read the document-based question. Consider what you already know about this topic. How would you answer the question if you had no documents to examine?
  2. Now, read each document carefully, underlining key phrases and words that address the document-based question. You may also wish to use the margin to make brief notes. Answer the questions which follow each document.
  3. Based on your own knowledge and the information found in the documents, formulate a thesis that directly answers the question.
  4. Organize supportive and relevant information into a brief outline.
  5. Write a well-organized essay proving your thesis. The essay should be logically presented and should include information both from the documents and from your own knowledge outside of the documents.

- *Question: What were the most important causes of the French Revolution?(Discuss three.) (Tenth-grade social studies)*

how the essay will be graded, providing a tool for revision and self-evaluation. New York State, where this question originated, offers a generic rubric for the document-based questions on state examinations. A superior paper (scoring 5 on a 0 to 5 scale):

- Thoroughly develops all aspects of the task evenly and in depth
- Is more analytical than descriptive (analyzes, evaluates, and/or creates information)
- Incorporates relevant information from at least xxx documents [xxx varies by item]
- Incorporates substantial relevant outside information
- Richly supports the theme with many relevant facts, examples, and details
- Demonstrates a logical and clear plan of organization; includes an introduction and a conclusion that are beyond a restatement of the theme (Office of State Assessment)

This task is typical of many that we have seen across subject areas, with built-in scaffolding and an obvious attempt to be clear about what success will require. Many of the other tasks we have seen exhibit some of the problems that are buried even in this example, however. Although the task requires students to work with new material, the underlying task remains one that begins with a restatement or summary of points that have been developed in previous classes or in the textbook, and then using the new documents to illustrate (or "richly support") those points. There is also a tendency in tasks of this type to generate formulaic writing. In this particular case, the admonition to "discuss three" causes of the French Revolution points strongly toward a five-paragraph theme, albeit one to be elaborated with new details drawn from the accompanying primary source documents.

George Hillocks Jr. noted this tendency toward formulaic writing in his critique of state writing assessments, and teachers in the schools we studied were quite aware of the dangers, if resigned to the necessity. As one put it,

> We tend to be repetitive of what we want them to write, what we want them to include, and . . . the process that they need to use in order to get everything included. I think we become repetitive, but it's the nature of the beast—same things with TAKS (Texas Assessment of Knowledge and

> Skills); this is what you have to write, this is what has to be included, you have to include this number of quotes, you have to respond to your quote, so I think our essays become the same thing. We are able to use different literature, but the essays tend to have the same process. Same outline. (Twelfth-grade English teacher)

On the brighter side, some teachers have been successful in revising their curriculum and instruction in response to new knowledge about effective instruction, educating students who do well on high-stakes tests because they are immersed in a rich and engaging curriculum (Langer, *Getting to Excellent*). At the end of their visit, one of our teams of field researchers described such a high school program, warts and all:

> From the teachers observed and interviewed, it seemed the majority of teachers had an in depth understanding of how writing can propel thinking, how writing can help students understand content, and how writing can help teachers understand what students come away with. They draw on a wide repertoire of approaches and strategies. Most impressive is that teachers have specific intentions, and are very reflective about the writing strategies they teach. Some of the strategies observed were: deconstructing prompts, how to pose questions, how to anticipate readers' questions, strategies for paraphrasing, Socratic Seminars, use of criteria charts, writing on "Classroom Graffiti Walls."
>
> In the English Department several years ago, the focus was on the Jane Schaffer Method. They stopped four years ago, but some teachers still use elements of it. The materials have a lot of value, but the intense focus on structure is problematic. Many teachers stopped with teaching particular structures, and students wrote very formulaic essays—almost "fill in the blank." At the same time, it did help struggling students. They knew how to proceed. . . .
>
> The majority of writing observed was process-based. Even in classes where students would be engaging in on-demand writing, class time was spent on drafting, sharing, and analyzing student writing. It seemed there really was a lot of small group work, and a lot of student "talking." Discussion of the process and ideas. Sometimes the "talk" helped craft the writing, and sometimes the writing was preliminary to full-class discussion. For example, after engaging in the "Graffiti Wall," and looking at letters written during the Great Depression, one student from each small group answered the "essential question" for their unit. And that was, "How did ordinary Americans endure the hardship of the Great Depression?" Oral language was an essential piece in many classrooms. (Field Researchers' Summary and Interpretation of School Visit)

The Bottom Line

Clearly the 30 years since the previous national study have seen a great deal of development in teachers' conceptions of writing and its importance in learning. Across subject areas, teachers voice an understanding of the ways in which writing can contribute to learning, see writing as a valuable tool for assessing students' understanding, and in many cases see unique and particular roles that writing could play within their own disciplines.

At the same time, the actual writing that goes on in typical classrooms across the United States remains dominated by tasks in which the teacher does all the composing, and students are left only to fill in missing information, whether copying directly from a teacher's presentation, completing worksheets and chapter summaries, replicating highly formulaic essay structures keyed to the high-stakes tests they will be taking, or writing the particular information the teacher is seeking. Given the constraints imposed by high-stakes tests, writing as a way to study, learn, and go beyond—as a way to construct knowledge or generate new networks of understandings (Langer, *Envisioning Knowledge, Envisioning Literature*)—is rare.

In the various phases of the National Study of Writing Instruction, we also saw examples of teachers and schools that were very successful in creating rich and engaging programs. The challenge for the profession is how to ensure that such programs can continue to flourish and spread to other schools in spite of the constraints and pressures that are generated by the demands of high-stakes tests, those that omit writing altogether or lead to formulaic teaching, as well as those that, in a few cases, seem to make positive contributions to what teachers do. The new Common Core Standards, with their recognition of writing as a central strand comparable to reading in the teaching of English language arts and other subjects across the grades, may offer an opportunity to rethink what counts within the

high-stakes environment in which schools and teachers now function. But even more critical will be how those Standards are translated into the assessments that will ultimately shape what happens in schools and classrooms.

Note

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