

What Is Happening in the Teaching of Writing?

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It has been almost 30 years since the last systematic look at writing instruction in middle schools and high schools in the United States (Applebee, *Writing*). Since that report, there have been a number of significant changes in the contexts in which we teach and in which our students learn to write. In the larger culture, the technologies for creating written text have changed from electric typewriters to word processors and a plethora of related tools. In a related development, Internet search engines and the resources to which they lead have become a primary source for information from the mundane to the exotic. The context of schooling has also changed, with programs and practices affected most directly by an emphasis on standards and assessments as part of a growing concern with accountability. Given a focus on reading, rather than writing or literacy more generally, by the No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB), this movement has had an impact on teaching and learning at all levels of public education. It has also led to reemphasis of the importance of professional “capacity”—and on the continuing development of teachers’ knowledge and expertise to be sure that such capacity exists.

Amid all of these changes, it is time for those of us concerned about the teaching of English to take stock of the state of writing instruction and to ask, What has been happening to the teaching and learning of writing in American schools? How have these changes, particularly the emphasis on reading rather than literacy more broadly, influenced the ways in which writing instruction is offered by teachers and experienced by students, across the curriculum? Fully answering these questions will require a new national study of writing instruction,

a project that is currently underway as part of a collaboration between the Center on English Learning and Achievement and the National Writing Project. Check our website (<http://www.albany.edu/cela>) for updates as that study progresses.

Before gathering new data, we began by examining information available from the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP; Applebee and Langer). During the spring of 2007, the US Department of Education released the latest results from its periodic assessments of the writing achievement of American school children. Stretching back to the 1969–70 school year, NAEP, also known as the Nation’s Report Card, gathers background data about teachers’ and students’ perceptions of curriculum and instruction as well as measuring student performance. It thus provides some interesting perspectives on changes over time in writing instruction as well as in writing achievement.

How Well Do Students Write?

NAEP assesses students’ writing achievement with an extensive set of on-demand writing tasks developed through a consensus process involving teachers, administrators, and scholars from around the country. Assessments may include 20 to 25 different tasks at each grade level, designed to assess students’ abilities to write imaginatively, persuasively, and informatively, including the ability to analyze and synthesize. In emphasis, the NAEP tasks parallel the writing components of many state assessments, but the national sampling plan allows more tasks to be assessed each year than any state or dis-

trict is able to include in their assessments. Each student response is scored using a focused holistic rubric that includes components for purpose, audience, idea development/support, organization/structure, sentence structure, word choice, voice, and mechanics. Results across students are pooled statistically to provide estimates of group performance on a standardized writing scale (ranging initially from 0–500), which NAEP uses to estimate performance levels. Aware that on-demand assessment might differ from classroom-based performance, NAEP has also systematically assessed classroom-based writing, with quite similar results (Gentile, Martin-Rehrmann, and Kennedy).

In 2007, between 80% and 90% of middle school and high school students had achieved what NAEP identifies as “basic” writing skills appropriate to their grade level, but only 31% at Grade 8 and 23% at Grade 12 were rated as “proficient.” In the NAEP framework, being proficient at Grade 12 means a student is “able to produce an effectively organized and fully developed response within the time allowed [the specific amount of allotted time has varied in recent years from 15 to 50 minutes] that uses analytical, evaluative, or creative thinking. Their writing should include details that support and develop the main idea of the piece, and it should show that these students are able to use precise language and variety in sentence structure to engage the audience they are expected to address” (Loomis and Bourque 10). Gaps in achievement in 2007 were large, with only 8% of Black twelfth-grade students and 11% of Hispanic twelfth-grade students rated as proficient, compared with 29% of their White peers.

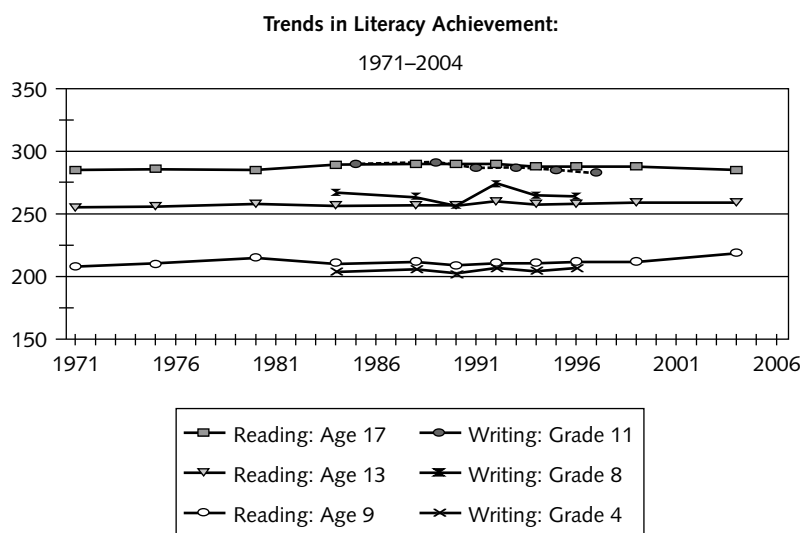
Looking more broadly at NAEP data makes it clear both how deeply ingrained this pattern is and how widespread are the inequities in achievement. Figure 1 summarizes long-term trends in literacy achievement on a 0–500 scale that allows comparisons over time and across grades. The most complete data are for reading

achievement across the period 1971–2004 (the last long-term trend reading assessment for which data are available); results for a similar set of measures of writing achievement for the 12-year period from 1984 to 1996 are superimposed on those for reading. Although some year-to-year fluctuations in both reading and writing achievement are statistically significant, the most striking aspect of the chart is how slow changes in performance have been. The youngest students (9-year-olds/Grade 4) showed the greatest gain—11 points on the 500-point scale over 33 years; the oldest students (17-year-olds/Grade 12) showed no change at all, with 13-year-olds in between, with a 4-point gain across this 33-year span of time.

The relatively modest gains for students as a whole mask some significant improvements for historically underachieving subgroups. Across the 29-year span for which data can be disaggregated, the gaps between White students and their Hispanic and Black peers narrowed at all three ages

How have these changes, particularly the emphasis on reading rather than literacy more broadly, influenced the ways in which writing instruction is offered by teachers and experienced by students, across the curriculum?

FIGURE 1. Trends in Literacy Achievement: 1971–2004



Source: U.S. Department of Education, Institute of Education Sciences, National Center for Education Statistics, National Assessment of Educational Progress, Long-Term Trend Assessment in Reading; writing results from Campbell, Voelkl, and Donahue.

assessed (see fig. 2), though not significantly so for Hispanic 13-year-olds. In general, the progress was greatest at the older ages, with Black students making better progress than their Hispanic classmates. It is discomfoting to note, however, that the gaps that remain are larger than the gains that have been achieved. In the case of Hispanic 13-year-olds, the gap is still some four times as large as the 29-year-gain (a 6-point gain with a 24-point gap remaining).

The attempt to maintain a long-term trend line in writing was abandoned after 1996 because there were too few items in the trend assessment to yield accurate results. Because of this, results from the writing assessments after 1996 were reported on a different scale (0–300) that allows comparisons across years but not across grades. Using this scale, shorter-term trends, over the nine years from 1998 to 2007, show significant gains in writing achievement at Grades 8 (6 points) and 12 (4 points), for the nation and for specific subgroups. (Grade 4, which was not included in the 2007 assessment, showed a 5-point gain from 1998 to 2002.) These gains in overall achievement in writing were not

matched by reductions in the gaps for Black and Hispanic students or for those eligible for free or reduced-price lunch. The inequities in achievement remain large.

Surprisingly, given the typically high correlation between reading and writing achievement—reflected in the nearly parallel lines in Figure 1—reading achievement has not shown a similar improvement at eighth or twelfth grade during this period, in spite of the focus on reading generated by NCLB. Grade 4 reading, however, does show parallel growth between 1998 and 2002, and continued growth through 2007.

How Much Writing Do Students Do?

In 2002, the College Board established a high-profile National Commission on Writing, which took as one of its premises that the quality of writing must be improved if students are to succeed in college and in life. In their major policy statement, *The Neglected “R”: The Need for a Writing Revolution*, the Commission emphasized the importance of devoting more time to writing instruction, recommending that the amount of time that students spend on writing should be at least doubled, and that writing should be assigned across the curriculum. NAEP provides some interesting data related to this issue, including some indication of trends over time.

One set of questions in NAEP long-term trend data asked students about the kinds of writing that they had done for English class during the previous week (see figs. 3 and 4). In 1988, 42% of 13-year-old students (typically Grade 8) reported having written at least one essay, composition, or theme for English; by 2004, this had increased to 62%. Other types of writing also showed significant increases over this 16-year period, including the percentage of students who had written another kind of report, a letter, a poem, or a story. At age 17 (Grade 12), 62% of the students in 1988 reported having written an essay, composition, or theme in the past week, which increased to 71% by 2004. Reports for other types of writing also tended to show an increase for 17-year-olds, but the changes were significant only for other reports (which rose from 36% to 47%), plays (from 12% to 15%), and poems (from 21% to 30%).

FIGURE 2. Differences in Average Reading Achievement, NAEP Long-Term Trend Results, 1975–2004

		WHITE AVERAGE	BLACK GAP	HISPANIC GAP
Age 9	1975	216.6	-35.4	-33.8
	2004	226.4	-26.0	-21.1
	Difference		9	6
Age 13	1975	262.1	-36.3	-29.6
	2004	266.0	-21.6	-23.5
	Difference		15	6
Age 17	1975	293.0	-52.3	-40.5
	2004	292.8	-29.0	-29.2
	Difference		23	11

Source: U.S. Department of Education, Institute of Education Sciences, National Center for Education Statistics, National Assessment of Educational Progress, Long-Term Trend Assessment in Reading. Figures in italics are statistically significantly different from 1975.

FIGURE 3. Writing for English Last Week: Age 13

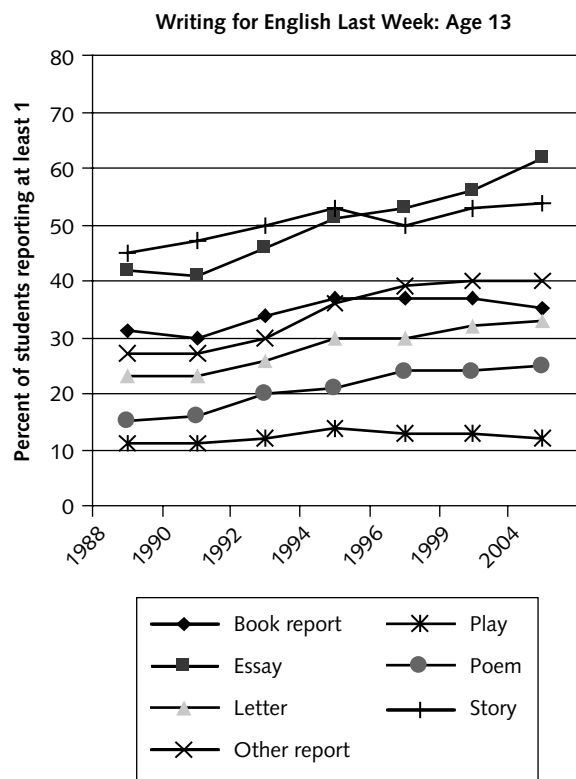
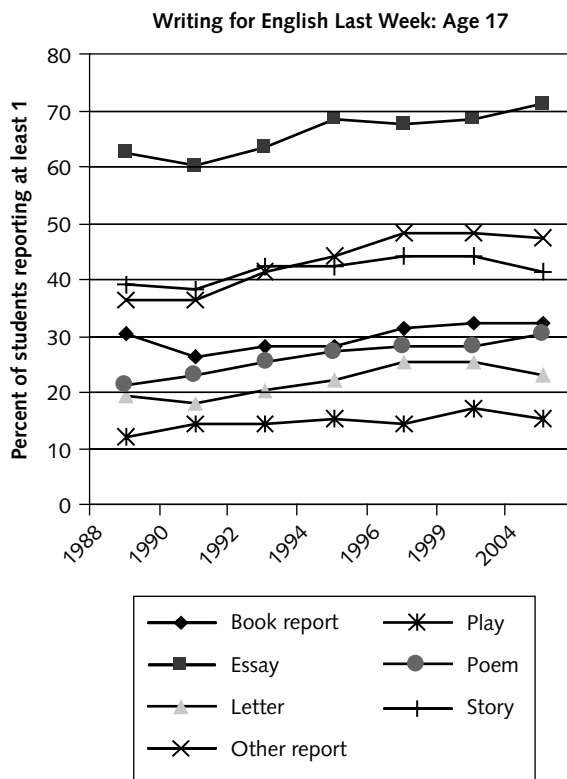


FIGURE 4. Writing for English Last Week: Age 17



Source: U.S. Department of Education, Institute of Education Sciences, National Center for Education Statistics, National Assessment of Educational Progress, Long-Term Trend Assessment in Reading.

These results suggest that at least through the 1990s, English teachers were gradually increasing the amount of writing that they were asking students to do. The results also suggest that both expository and imaginative writing benefited to some degree from this increase in emphasis, though by the end of high school, instruction was focused much more narrowly on essay writing.

During this period, teachers also seemed to be raising the stakes a bit on the writing that students were asked to do. Between 1988 and 1998, both teachers and students reported an increase in requirements for longer writing—papers of one or two pages and papers of three pages or more—particularly at Grade 12. This increase seems to have occurred by 1992 and leveled off after that. Even in 1998, however, some 40% of twelfth-grade students reported *never* or *hardly ever* writing papers of three pages or more for their English language arts classes, and 14% were not writing papers of even one or two pages.

Thus, although over the longer term there has been some increase in the writing students are doing, many students seem not to be given assignments requiring writing of any significant length or complexity. This is of particular concern for the college-bound students who will be expected to write even longer papers when they begin their college coursework, as well as for those entering better-paying jobs with higher literacy demands in the workforce (American Diploma Project).

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More recent results, however, suggest that these gains may be eroding in the face of an increased emphasis on reading skills, and perhaps also on high-stakes tests in which writing may have little place.

Student reports of the types of writing they do “for school” between 2002 and 2007 show a small but significant drop at Grade 8 in the frequency of every type of writing about which students were asked: essays that interpret or analyze (4 percentage points lower for reports of “at least monthly”), letters or essays to persuade others (1 point), a story about personal or imagined experience (3 points), summaries of something read (5 points), observations in a log or journal (3 points), and business writing (e.g., résumé or letter to a company; 2 points).

Over the same five-year period, students in Grade 12 reported far fewer changes: persuasive writing and summaries of readings dropped slightly (2 points), while persuasive writing (3 points) and use of logs or journals (2 points) increased slightly.

These reports from students are reinforced by teachers’ reports of their instructional emphases at Grade 8. In both 2002 and 2007, eighth-grade teachers were asked to estimate the percent of time in which their primary instructional focus was on writing, on literary analysis, or on reading skills. Their responses are summarized in Figure 5 and show a small but significant drop in the degree of emphasis on writing, with concomitant increases in the em-

phasis on the development of reading skills and on literary analysis. (Teacher reports are not available at Grade 12.)

Is There Any Evidence of Writing Across the Curriculum?

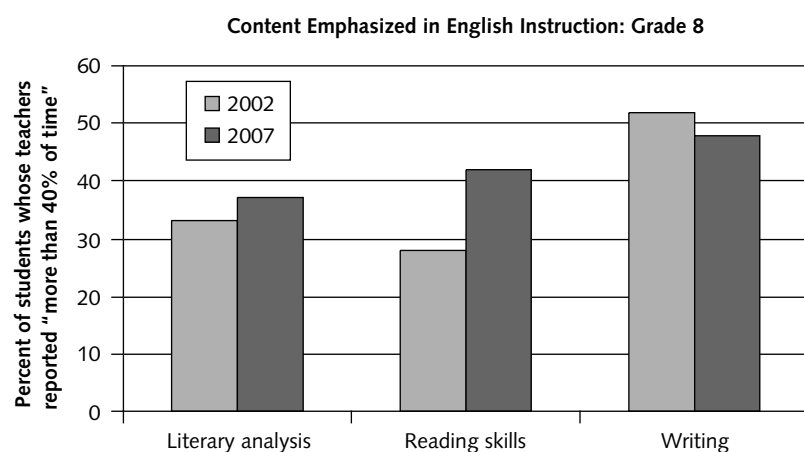
Studies of instruction in the early 1980s suggested that while English language arts classes are the most likely to focus on writing, students write more for their other subjects combined than they do for English (Applebee, *Contexts*). This in turn has a significant effect on their development as writers.

Student reports on NAEP items suggest that their writing for other subjects continues to represent a substantial part of their total writing experiences. In 2007, 69% of eighth-grade students reported writing of at least paragraph length at least once a week for English, together with 44% for social studies, 30% for science, and 13% for math. Twelfth-grade students reported somewhat more writing for English (77%) and somewhat less for each of the other content areas: 42% for social studies, 21% for science, and 8% for math.

These results on writing in the content areas also show small but significant declines of 2 percentage points in emphasis at Grade 8 between 2002 and 2007 for English, social studies, and science. Twelfth grade again shows a different pattern, with small but significant increases for English (3 percentage points) and social studies (2 points) over this five-year period.

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FIGURE 5. Content Emphasized in English Instruction: Grade 8



Source: U.S. Department of Education, Institute of Education Sciences, National Center for Education Statistics, National Assessment of Educational Progress, 2002 and 2007 Writing Assessments.

Is Technology Used to Support Writing Instruction?

One of the biggest changes to affect the teaching of writing in the past two decades has been the spread of technology, and with it the development of powerful word-processing software and Internet resources. The National Commission on Writing was enthusiastic about the potential benefits of technology for writing instruction, and reviews of research on the effect of word processing on students’ writing

achievement support that enthusiasm (Bangert-Drowns; Graham and Perin). In general the use of word-processing software has a positive effect on the development of writing abilities, and particularly so for underachieving students.

The spread of technology is readily apparent in NAEP data. In 1984, 20% or fewer of middle school and high school students reported using computers in their writing; by 1994, over 90% reported doing so (Campbell, Voelkl, and Donahue 191).

After 1996, NAEP began to ask more specific questions about the ways in which computers were being used. Figure 6 summarizes student responses in 2002 and 2007. The majority of eighth- and twelfth-grade students report that they “almost always” use the Internet to look for information to use in a paper or report, with twelfth-grade students being even more likely to do so than eighth-grade students. Interestingly, Internet use to gather information is consistently reported more frequently than is the use of word processing for writing and editing a draft. In fact, in 2007, only 26% of eighth-grade students reported that they “almost always” use a computer from the beginning to write their first draft, though 44% reported using a computer for such editing functions as spell-checking or cutting and pasting. Twelfth-grade students showed a similar pattern, though with more frequent use of the computer for both drafting and revising.

The two grade levels also show quite distinct patterns of change between 2002 and 2007. While twelfth-grade students were more likely to use computers for all three tasks in 2007 than in 2002, eighth-grade students reported slightly but significantly less use of computers for writing drafts and for revising.

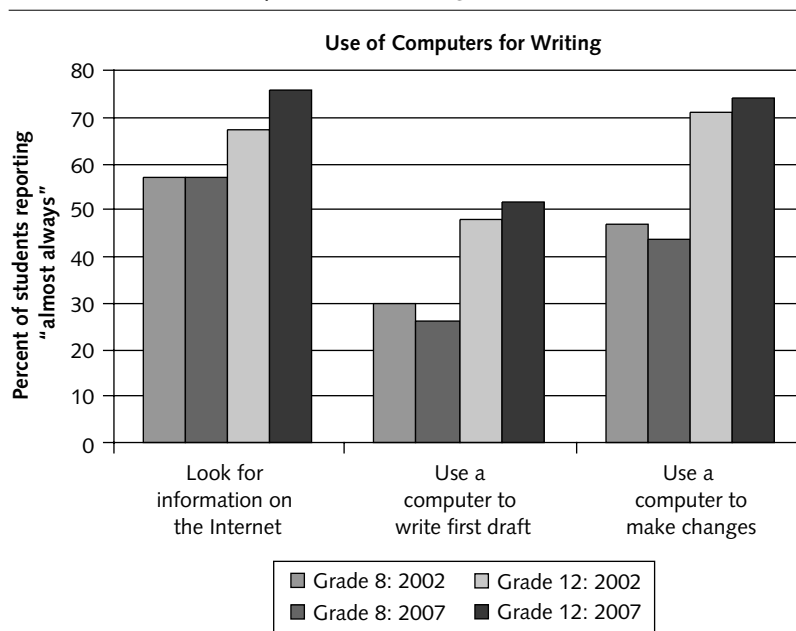
There are several different factors contributing to these results. One is certainly the continued spread of computer technology and the increasing availability of computers both in school and at home, which has led to greater use of computer-based tools of all

sorts. At the same time, many classrooms do not have computers available at all times for all students, so that much of the time students begin assignments by hand in class, moving their work to a computer after they have already gotten started.

There is still another factor that may be limiting the use of computers at Grade 8: Many high-stakes exams are still given with paper and pencil rather than from a computer-based platform. (NAEP data indicate that even in 2002 some 92% of seventh- or eighth-grade students faced a state exam in English language arts.) This makes some teachers, and indeed some districts, reluctant to allow their students to make regular use of word processing, in case students might find it difficult to make the transition back to paper and pencil in the exam context. Michael Russell and Lisa Abrams, for example, found in a 2001 survey that nationally

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FIGURE 6. Use of Computers for Writing



Source: U.S. Department of Education, Institute of Education Sciences, National Center for Education Statistics, National Assessment of Educational Progress, 2002 and 2007 Writing Assessments.

some 30% of teachers report that they do not use computers when teaching writing because it does not match the format of the state assessment, and 4.4% report that school or district policy actually prohibited computer use for the teaching of writing.

Although the impetus for these policies is understandable, they have the perverse effect of limiting students' ability to use the tools that will be required for success in higher education and the world of work, where word processing and computer use are now taken for granted. This problem may be ameliorated in the relatively near future, as large-scale testing, including NAEP, migrates toward computer-based delivery. The framework for the 2011 NAEP writing assessment, for example, calls for eighth- and twelfth-grade students to be assessed with word processors, with access to a variety of commonly available editing tools (Act, Inc., "Writing").

What about Instruction?

Time and attention to writing instruction are not all that is necessary to improve the teaching of writing. What students are taught also matters.

For at least the last 25 years, the improvement of writing instruction has emphasized teaching students the skills and strategies needed to write effectively in a variety of contexts and disciplines. Such instruction has typically been called process-oriented and has tended to emphasize extensive prewriting activities, multiple drafts, sharing of work with partners or small groups, and careful attention to writing conventions before sharing with others.

By 1992, process-oriented instruction had become the conventional wisdom, with over 71% of students at Grade 8 in classrooms where the teacher reported that it was a *central* part of instruction, and another 26% in classrooms using it as a *supplemental* part; results in 1998 were essentially identical. (Comparable data are not available for Grade 12 or for later years.) By 1998, the reported emphasis on process instruction was consistent across subgroups of students defined by race/ethnicity and by eligibility for free or reduced-price lunch.

Although later assessments did not ask teachers about their emphasis on process-oriented in-

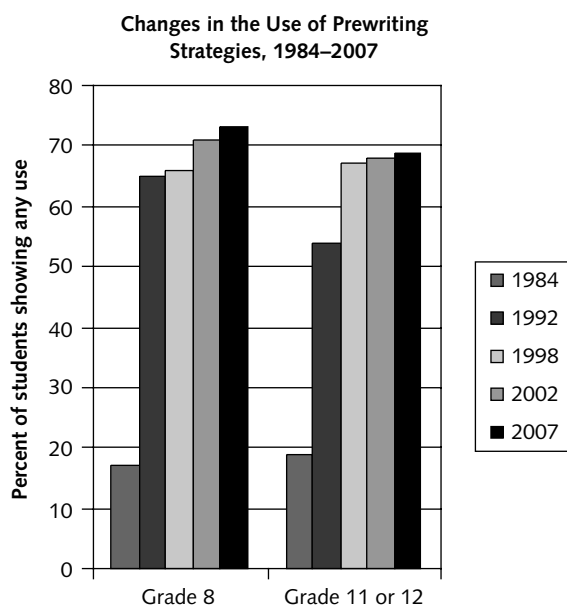
struction, they do include reports from students on how they approached school writing tasks. Overall patterns are quite similar at Grades 8 and 12 in 2007, with more than 60% reporting that they almost always make changes to fix mistakes, and 30% to 40% reporting almost always writing more than one draft. Strategies requiring interaction with others were somewhat less frequent at both grades (brainstorming, 15%; working with others in pairs or small groups, 25% to 28%).

In spite of the overall similarity between Grades 8 and 12, the two groups moved in opposite directions between 2002 and 2007. Eighth-grade students showed small but significant reductions in each of these strategies, reducing their use from 1 to 3 percentage points. The twelfth-grade students reported small increases, again ranging from 1 to 3 percentage points. (The increases were statistically significant for making changes to fix mistakes and for organizing before beginning to write, and trend toward significance for brainstorming with others.) Again, the grade-level differences over time may be related to the greater demands of high-stakes testing facing eighth-grade students, leading to a focus on the production of first and final drafts with less scope for an elaborated writing process.

The changes at Grade 8 in students' reports between 2002 and 2007 are paralleled by changes in the responses from their teachers. The teacher reports showed similar small but significant reductions in asking students to write more than one draft, to plan before they write, and to check proper spelling and grammar.

What students say they do and what they actually do are not always the same. On some of the writing assessments, students were encouraged to use an extra blank page for planning before they began to write, and these pages were scored for the number of different activities students demonstrated. Over time, the use of this prewriting space for NAEP tasks has changed dramatically (see fig. 7). In 1984, a few of the assignments in the assessment left a blank page for the students to make notes or outlines, but fewer than 20% of Grade 8 or Grade 11 students made use of the space. Since 1992, every task has provided room for prewriting. (From 1998 on, students were also given a separate brochure that emphasized the importance of selected planning and revising strategies.) In these

FIGURE 7. Changes in the Use of Prewriting Strategies, 1984–2007



Source: U.S. Department of Education, Institute of Education Sciences, National Center for Education Statistics, National Assessment of Educational Progress, 2002 and 2007 Writing Assessments. Data for 1984 from Applebee, Langer, and Mullis (70); for 1992 from Applebee et al. (181); for 1998 from Greenwald et al. (95).

later assessments, many more students made at least some use of the space provided. Even with the differences in test administration, students' tendency to do some overt planning before they begin to write seems to have increased across this 23-year time span.

Are Teachers Engaging in Appropriate Professional Development?

The past 20 years of educational reform have placed a special emphasis on professional development as a way to build instructional "capacity" in schools and districts. This has been accompanied by a movement away from one-shot inservice programs toward longer-term engagement in the development of new strategies and approaches to curriculum and instruction. The National Writing Project, which is cosponsoring our current study of writing instruction, was one of the earliest and has been one of the most successful of these new approaches to professional development.

In 2002, 78% of Grade 8 students and 69% of Grade 12 students were in schools that reported providing professional development experiences to their teachers emphasizing reading and writing processes. Similar proportions (76% at Grade 8 and 72% at Grade 12) were in schools that reported professional development experiences that emphasized language arts across the curriculum. Results in Grade 8 in 2007 show a slight shift, with 4% more reporting professional development was "to a large extent" focused on reading and writing, and 4% fewer reporting it focused to "a large extent" on language arts across the curriculum. Grade 12 responses followed a similar pattern, but the differences were not statistically significant.

Interestingly, 78% of the students had teachers who cited an experience that emphasized reading or writing processes. This is testimony to how important understanding of underlying literacy processes is to teachers of English language arts.

Another question asked Grade 8 teachers about the characteristics of the professional development experience that had most influenced their teaching. Interestingly, 78% of the students had teachers who cited an experience that emphasized reading or writing processes. This is testimony to how important understanding of underlying literacy processes is to teachers of English language arts.

At both Grades 8 and 12, the great majority of students in 2002 were in schools in which professional development focused on linking instruction to standards, with slightly greater emphasis at Grade 12 than at Grade 8 (81% versus 88%).

In 2002, the majority (83%) of Grade 8 students had teachers who also agreed that their state's language arts standards support good teaching, although only 50% had teachers who believed that the accompanying state assessments were good measures of their students' language arts achievement, and 62% felt that preparing for and taking the state assessment uses too much instructional time. (These questions were not asked of teachers at Grade 12.)

These data suggest that teachers of English language arts are by and large aware of the potential usefulness of standards and respond positively to professional development experiences that help

them support their students' reading and writing processes. However, such learning experiences were not made available to 20%–30% of the teachers surveyed, and the extent and usefulness of the experiences that were provided is unclear. Further, fully half of teachers seem to have perceived a mismatch between their statewide tests and their professional notions of good performance.

Conclusion

This first look at the state of writing instruction through the lens of the National Assessment of Educational Progress leads to a number of conclusions

What is clear is that even with some increases over time, many students are not writing a great deal for any of their academic subjects, including English, and most are not writing at any length.

and a great many more questions. Long-term trend data for both writing and reading show a remarkable stability in levels of achievement over time. Despite small ups and downs, by and large, student writing proficiency has remained steady. Gaps between more-advantaged and less-advantaged students also con-

tinue, even with the noticeable upturn in writing achievement between 1998 and 2007 at Grade 8, and between 2002 and 2007 at Grade 12. The twelfth-grade upturn may in fact be a cohort effect, with earlier gains at Grade 8 showing up a few years later at Grade 12.

Although a fuller picture using more than one indicator of students' literacy abilities is critical for making decisions about individual students, the NAEP results point to a real and pervasive problem, one that, despite small ups and downs, has remained relatively persistent since NAEP was authorized by Congress in 1969. It is certainly true that the assessment emphasis on on-demand writing is out of alignment with curriculum and instruction that emphasizes an extended process of writing and revision, taps only a subset of the academic skills and knowledge students need, and leaves no room for the technological tools that students increasingly use both in and outside of school. However, it is also true that even given these failings, a consistent message from the NAEP results points to a need for improvement—in the ways in

which curriculum and instruction are conceived as well as in how achievement is tested.

Data over time also suggest that there has been some increase in emphasis on writing and the teaching of writing, both in English language arts classrooms and across the curriculum, although this may have begun to decline from its high. Process-oriented writing instruction has dominated teachers' reports at least since 1992, but what teachers mean by this and how it is implemented in their classrooms remains unclear. The consistent emphasis that emerges in teachers' reports may mask considerable variation in actual patterns of instruction (see Langer and Applebee).

What is clear is that even with some increases over time, many students are not writing a great deal for any of their academic subjects, including English, and most are not writing at any length. Some 40% of twelfth-grade students, for example, report never or hardly ever being asked to write a paper of three pages or more. Although short, focused writing is also important, extended writing is necessary to explore ideas or develop arguments in depth. It also reflects the demands that they will face in postsecondary education.


The NAEP data also highlight some external forces that are affecting the teaching of writing, in particular the spread of state standards and accompanying high-stakes tests. In some cases, these may be shifting attention away from a broad program of writing instruction toward a much narrower focus on how best to answer particular types of test questions. Both students and teachers at Grade 8, for example, report small but significant declines in emphasis on a variety of writing processes, which may reflect the importance of short, on-demand writing on high-stakes tests. Teachers at Grade 8 also report a shift in overall emphasis in their use of instructional time away from writing toward reading.

Advances in technology have made word-processing tools and Internet resources widely available, and students report making extensive use of them in their writing. At the same time, new genres and forms of publication have emerged that integrate a variety of media and capitalize on the flexibility of hypertext. From instant messages to Web pages to blogs to embedded graphics and

videos, these changes are certainly having an impact on students' writing experiences, though they do not yet appear in NAEP. We do not know the extent to which students have opportunities to engage with the wealth of data available through technology as input for their writing nor the frequency with which they use various unimodal or multimodal technologies to carry out school tasks. Even the use of word processors for drafting and revising may be less prevalent in schools than might be expected, as a byproduct of limited availability of the necessary technology as well as in response to testing programs that emphasize paper-and-pencil assessments.

Education has been high on the nation's agenda since at least the mid-1990s with the national standards movement, followed by NCLB. But where has this taken us? We are living in an educational era where reading is often considered content-free, where mathematics and science skills and content knowledge rather than ways to think about that content still predominate (although the standards in both subjects call for a broader focus on problem solving and communication skills), and where writing seems to have evaporated from public concern. In an article in *Education Week*, Kathleen Kennedy Manzo reported that high school students who aspire to attend college will likely be unprepared to tackle the complex reading and writing tasks they will encounter. A large part of the article was based on a 2006 ACT report that only 51% of the ACT test takers who wished to attend colleges met ACT's college benchmarks in reading (Act, Inc., *Reading*). Along with interview comments by experts across the country, Manzo concludes that although there is a rush to bolster math and science, there is reason for concern that reading and writing (and their role in content learning) will be "left out of the mix" (1). Despite national concern for overall student achievement, the analyses of NAEP data reported here suggest that writing may already be dropping from attention.

English teachers can take these results as both a warning and a call. They warn us that one major aspect of the English curriculum has unwittingly been given short shrift, and that one aspect of our mission may be receding without our notice. The findings also provide a call. While aligning instruc-

tion with standards has become an ongoing activity in many schools, this needs to be done with a special eye to what is happening in writing, including awareness of the frequency, length, and types of writing students are asked to do, as well as the various technologies they employ when doing so. Knowing that our assessments do not test all that students need to know and be able to do, NAEP results can be seen as a call for English teachers across the country to enter into professional discussions about the writing skills and knowledge students will need to do well at school, in higher education, and on the job. Although it is important for students to do well on high-stakes tests, it is our professional obligation to ensure they become the writers they will need to be as they leave our secondary schools at the cusp of lives as adults and citizens. 

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Note

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Except as otherwise noted, the data in this article are drawn from NAEP's online data analysis system, the NAEP Data Explorer (<http://nces.ed.gov/nationsreportcard/naep-data/>). This system generates customized tables based on a variety of background variables generated at student, teacher, school, and community levels, including tests of the statistical significance of differences between groups or over time. Two different sets of NAEP data are available. For the long-term trend assessment, students respond to exactly the same items over time in targeted subject areas at ages 9, 13, and 17. Cross-sectional assessments provide point-in-time data with a shifting pool of items for both achievement and background variables. Results cited in the present article focus on public schools in the nation as a whole.

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