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Writing to learn in the secondary social studies classroom: Strategies for the disinclined

Sharon Price McKiernan

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WRITING TO LEARN IN THE SECONDARY SOCIAL STUDIES CLASSROOM:
STRATEGIES FOR THE DISINCLINED

A Thesis
Presented to the
Faculty of
California State University,
San Bernardino

In Partial Fulfillment
Of the Requirements for the Degree
Master of Arts
In
English Composition

by
Sharon Price McKiernan
September 2000
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ABSTRACT

Colleges and Universities have used Writing Across the Curriculum for decades, adding Writing to Learn, and now Writing Intensive classes, all in an attempt to improve the writing, thinking, and organizational skills of students. The National Writing Project, the first of the discipline projects, each year inducts roughly one thousand teachers into institutes which prepare them not only to continue teaching the writing process, but also to make them presenters who can pass the baton on to other teachers in various disciplines. Why, then, are students coming to the universities, colleges, and junior colleges of this country unable to write academic papers? Are history teachers, in particular, using the writing process and writing to learn techniques? If not, why not? And most importantly, can we in the Composition program supply these teachers, presently disinclined, to use more writing, with specific strategies they can use right now to influence their students, who are similarly disinclined about writing?

This paper begins with sufficient research to support the contention that secondary teachers should be using writing in the classroom, proceeds to question why some are not, and then supplies specific lesson plan ideas which can be adapted to suit most needs in the secondary history classrooms. While the initial project is for an academic
thesis, the goal is a document that can be given to history teachers who want to begin using composition in their classes beginning immediately. Another significant goal is to remind secondary teachers, especially those in the content areas, that they are not being asked to do something for which they are not being offered adequate preparation. The more research that surfaced in preparation of this paper, the more I became convinced that the best ally of history teachers is the National Writing Project. State and local project websites provided an abundance of research, theory, and usable ideas which content teachers can access and put into practice. This integrated writing approach is being used successfully in many school districts. Once the inertia of 'business as usual' is overcome, one history teacher at a time, important advances can be made in the quality of student writing. Perhaps the time has never been better than right now, when the eyes, ears, and minds of the nation are aimed at educational reform.
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INTRODUCTION

On the February 27, 2000, segment of Meet the Press, three governors were quizzed about several of the main concerns facing most state governments. All three, including the colorful new governor of Minnesota, Jesse Ventura, agreed that education reform is a top priority. Had they neglected that subject, their constituents would surely have responded in droves. More than the economy, more than high taxes, more than election reform, the nation's tax-paying citizens fear that the next generation will not have the possibility or surety of a good education. California's teachers also feel this burden to reform and perform. For those of us who teach in this state, the pressure to have our students 'test well' exceeds all other concerns as we enter the Twenty-first Century. Our lesson plans must now show deliberate attention to new and very rigorous Standards for each content area. We must demonstrate how we plan to remediate (a word long abandoned and only recently revived) those students who face retention as a result of the end to social promotion. More impressive than even an Act of Congress was the Act of the Populace, the California state initiative which, in ending social promotion, called for more accountability from the schools.

Additionally, we have our annual 'test scores' published in newspapers across the state as our students
are compared with students in, say, Iowa. If our API (Academic Performance Index) score ratings are significantly lower than those students in Iowa, a panel of statisticians will juggle the delinquent numbers to show us how far we must improve next year’s scores in order to be considered successful teachers. In some cases we have old books which do not align with the district curriculum, and that district may not yet align with the state Standards. Add to that imbalance the fact that the state social studies test covers material not found in the curriculum, the text, or the standards, and you have a blueprint for disaster. Why would a content teacher risk adding another layer of teaching and assessment by asking students to write? How can teaching writing assist especially the social studies teacher to cover the immense amount of material demanded by the curriculum, the state standards, and the newly constructed and mandated tests?

California’s teachers daily face additional issues which affect not only the specter of the test, but also the methodology of their teaching. Unlike the typical Iowa farm student, many California students spoke another language before they learned English and may have been born in another country. Of course the English Language Learning programs (ELL) take special pains with teaching the emergent English speakers and writers. However, even
students who have been classified as FEP, or fluent in English, still benefit from frequent Specially Designed Academic Instruction in English (SDAIE) techniques which, while helpful, do slow down the instruction. Even in a 'regular' classroom, a typical southern California teacher will have several L2 (Second Language) learners—students who may not have the vocabulary or ingrained 'natural' flow of the language that native speakers have.

It is also true that some junior and senior high students see 'the essay' as one of the most painful assignments devised in the torture chambers of Hades. Just watch a teacher explain about tomorrow's writing assignment, and you will hear the groans of the students who are 'disinclined' toward writing. They may even tell you they HATE writing! And this predisposition to shun composition is NOT limited to the students. Far too many content teachers are also 'disinclined' to use writing to augment their curriculum and re-enforce the material being presented. Therefore, with all these problems and dilemmas before them, why should history teachers add another dimension to their already burdensome curriculum?

First, of course, teaching through writing is not new. Secondly, writing employs critical thinking skills, the academic reasoning sorely lacking in students. Thirdly, the content area teacher is the one most familiar with the traditions of writing employed in each specific discipline.
And finally, writing need not be the painful experience that many remember from their own school days.

It is time to demystify writing and get it beyond the realm of the English classroom. Writing can be a tool for communication between teachers and students. It can be a strategy to have students demonstrate critical thinking. Writing provides a framework for students to work through history problems. And finally it can be a method of assessment of the coveted higher-level thinking skills. More frequent, but less formal assignments which provide the student with quick comments and more instant success can also turn disinclined writers and disinclined instructors into partners and collaborators in active, engaged, vital learning.
CHAPTER I.

Defining the Terms; Making the Case

Define Learning

We teachers want everything possible from every student, partially because we each want to be the best teacher in the history of history. And because we read and write, and information about our subject is transmitted primarily through reading and writing, we know that our students should be avid readers and proficient writers. If only they came to us that way there would be no problem. But they do not come that way to the bewildered composition instructors at teaching universities, and they do not come that way to frustrated content teachers in secondary schools across the nation.

Presently in California this difficulty is compounded by the waves of current political storms. Perhaps beginning with the publication of A Nation at Risk, the political climate has centered on the failure rates of our students. A public protest went out to get these students 'Back to the Basics.' The phrase 'Back to Basics' suggests that at some point, education, or educators, left 'the three R's' behind in search of something else; maybe it was self-esteem, family planning, environmental awareness, globalism, or any number of state suggestions. Colleagues who have spent decades teaching in the government schools
say that this system is a pendulum, swinging back and forth, to and fro. Every few years it swings to the right, knocking down programs, workshop ideas, and in-service designs. Then it swings back to the left, opening doors for new researchers and developers of yet more innovative schemes. The word in the teacher's lounge is that if you stand still long enough, twice during any full swing you are on target. Is this the 'progress' in progressive education? One would certainly hope not.

Excellence in education is always the goal, whether the current buzzwords are Back to Basics, Whole Language, Skills-Based teaching, or some yet-to-be-invented noble phrase. And good teaching is always good teaching. But the way that teaching is delivered changed considerably in the course of the Twentieth Century.

Testing also underwent radical change. How do we assess what students have learned? Indeed, what does it mean 'to learn' history? And how do we, as teachers, gauge whether or not our students have learned?

Mastering history means far more than the ability to parrot back dates, battles, and names of famous people. Learning history requires that we interact with the information we encounter. "To study the past helps us understand better how we came to be who we are, helping us decide what to retain and what to reject. By showing us
that our lives are historically conditioned, we discover freedom, for we know that what is does not have to be this way (Marius 7)." According to Professor Richard Marius, then, while history may not repeat itself, as historians once advocated, its lessons do help us understand ourselves, our place in this world, and our responsibilities to the future. Today's choices create tomorrow's history. And that is 'the lesson' of history that we want to deliver to our students.

What, then, does it mean to 'learn' history? How does an instructor know that students have learned? We have already suggested that learning history means more than memorizing extraneous facts from the past. Professor Marius' comments suggest that real learning requires students to 'change or modify' their existing ideas or knowledge base, perhaps with an added sophistication. As they build their own frame of knowledge, constructing their own schematic frame of reference, students 'know something in the sense that they understand it (Anson 19).' Surely a multiple-choice test is not the best way to assess mastery of such understanding. But instructors can readily see this new cognitive construction as they read even short segments from a student's written paper. Written assignments can be carefully constructed so as to make that demonstration possible and even easier. For Marius further contends that
‘writing helps us think about what we know, and of course it helps our instructors see what we know and how we think (Marius 12).’ Writing also allows the students themselves to see what they know as they grapple with the new information, creating a picture before them of their own growing understanding.

Writing-to-Learn

People most often write to communicate. But why do we write in the academic setting? Communication is still one goal. Students are to collect and comprehend the written material of the past. Then they are expected to continue the process by showing their teachers what they have learned by organizing, analyzing, and communicating back to the instructors. But there is more to writing than this simple communicating, and there are new ways to write assignments which accommodate those other purposes.

Students and teachers alike are familiar with the standard writing activities of book reports, essays, book or movie reviews, and research reports. But a second category of writing falls into an area we call informal writing or 'writing-to-learn.' While it may be difficult to write a strict definition of such activities, they do share similar characteristics. For example, a teacher may ask students to write a very brief summary of the lecture just given. This exercise alerts both student and teacher to
points which may be unclear to the student. In general these writing-to-learn assignments
• encourage active learning
• are given a brief, limited time to complete
• are generally ungraded
• engage all students
• are useful in small as well as large classes
• are sometimes a beginning step toward a formal assignment
provide practice for essay exams (Manoa)

Writing can play a major role both in teaching critical thinking and in having students demonstrate what they have learned. The most important skill a student needs in the content areas is the ability to paraphrase and the ability to summarize what has been learned. In teaching this skill, the teacher should keep the student as close as possible to the text being read (Klein). Paraphrasing is the ability to state the material which has been read, sentence by sentence, in the student’s own words. The student then can write an accurate summary based on the paraphrases that have been developed. Because the paraphrases are taken directly from the reading, this method does keep the students close to the text. This strategy not only helps students write well, it also encourages a more careful reading of the material.
Summarizing is a skill that must come before the student can grapple with the deeper issues of analysis, problem-solving, and even prediction. 'Writing summaries helps you understand your sources, reduces your reliance on the words of others, and helps integrate the ideas and information of others into your own thinking (Far).’ These summaries provide excellent topics for quick-writes. They serve also as preparation for timed essay tests such as students will encounter in college. Summary writing encourages students to identify and write only the main points of the material, separating this type of material from the analysis or opinion.

Critical Thinking

Evaluation on the part of the student is another step toward giving ownership of the material where it belongs, with the next generation of historians. Can writing also assist the student in processing and making judgements about what is being learned? While the actual judgement touches the affective domain, making that evaluation is crucial in the cognitive domain. Can this all be done within the parameters of what history teachers must cover?

Professor Karen Jolly, instructor involved in the Manoa Writing Program, teaches a 300-level, writing intensive history course called The High Middle Ages. Professor Jolly writes:
My goal in the writing tasks is to foster critical thinking skills; then there are the content objectives. Students should come away with a fairly clear sense of the Middle Ages and that world view, and how that is the foundation of Western society and culture. Critical thinking is intimately intertwined with this content, because students have to struggle with the content to understand it. If they wrestle with this and they come to the conclusions, it will stick with them when they leave the course (Manoa). (Emphasis in original)

Professor Jolly understands the purpose of engaging each student. She further indicates the 'writing to learn' aspects of the assignments using the verbs 'struggle' and 'wrestle' to indicate how painful and enforcing that engagement can be.

It is clear from the following remarks of some of her students that they did make the connections she so painstakingly set into her assignments. One student wrote, "The writing caused me to really analyze all aspects of medieval history. Trying to look at a medieval text through a medieval point of view really taught me a lot about scratching beneath the surface (Manoa)." This ability to adopt another's point of view will not only carry this student through other history classes, but also into a world where tolerance of differing viewpoints is expected of an educated citizen.
Another student, when asked to discuss an aspect she did not like about the way the course was taught, responded: "I don't really dislike anything about this assignment, maybe just that the analysis is so involved that it needs to be thought out carefully, and sometimes it is time-consuming and difficult (Manoa)." In a quick-fix world filled with 90-minute sit-com solutions, how refreshing that a student learns the responsibility and effort involved in critical thinking. Professor Jolly can be pleased and proud of the work her students have done in written response involving primary material and requiring adaptation of point of view.

Affective Domain

How can teachers encourage learning and that love for history that they have discovered for themselves? It is a sad fact that junior high students frequently rate history as their least favorite subject. They find the topics boring because of the remoteness of the past. But when teachers can engage the learner in history, when students can create their own understanding of the material, the subject becomes exciting. Our purpose, then, is twofold. First, we want to capture the students' interests by having them write in the affective domain, that is, find the emotional, moral, or spiritual hook which makes people want to write at all. This may mean that teachers have to invest
some of themselves into discovering the hot spots for their charges. Part of this involves creating an audience which students will consider genuine or 'real world.' Students may be asked to write letters, editorials, or speeches, for example.

Once a purpose for writing is established, our next job is to help students place themselves into the designated period of history, using their own personality and experiences to engage the appropriate problems or conflicts of the specific era. It takes deliberately constructed assignments to insure that the student interacts with the material, historical figures, or ideas being presented.

ESL Issues; Know the Problem Areas

California teachers face some unique challenges. More than half of the students at California State University, Los Angeles this year (1999-2000) are second language students. (Typical) The university writing programs have certainly not neglected this segment of their population, and their research and experience can be invaluable to teachers in grades seven to twelve. While SDAIE and CLAD instruction has proven to be very helpful in educating L2 students in both reading and the content areas, there has been little effort to assist mainline teachers in teaching writing to second language learners. I have found more help through the Cal-State MA program in
Composition and on the Internet than I have been able to find through my district or the many other workshops that I have attended.

The most visible problem areas in writing for emergent or even fluent speakers include articles, which do not exist in many other languages, count and non-count nouns ("What is a count noun in one language may be non-count in another."), and tense of the verb. All these are easily recognizable in writing, although they may not be so easily noticed in oral fluency. Since these are editing problems, they need not slow down the writing process except in the final stages of the polished draft, that is, during editing.

A more serious deficiency for second language learners is the small and rather stagnant pool of words from which our students can readily draw. Our students need vocabulary development in all content areas, as well as a general academic and descriptive lexicon.

Many of our students lack the depth and breadth of vocabulary that help a writer express ideas. This may be because reading in their family has not been a priority, or it may simply be that the student has not spoken the language long enough to develop a wide or varied vocabulary. Limited vocabulary is a typical problem for immigrant students.
[T]his lack of vocabulary probably causes more syntactic difficulties than any other single problem. When you don’t know the word for something, you are forced into one of two strategies: to use a bilingual dictionary and choose a word you have not acquired and therefore have no feelings for, or to ‘write around’ the gap, describing the concept you are groping toward. This first strategy usually ends up with a word with inappropriate connotations, and the second often produces a complex and tangled sentence structure. (Typical)

Content teachers, therefore, may find themselves teaching more than just the vocabulary of their field. For example, ability to recognize synonyms was a weakness in one low testing middle school this past spring, as was discovered on the STAR 9 test, the present standardized test used in California. Ability to recognize and use synonyms is one indicator of depth of vocabulary. Deliberate and regular direct instruction in synonyms has become part of a plan to improve writing in this school (Beal).

Yet another consideration which teachers of second language students especially would do well to remember is that not all cultures construct a paragraph in the same way. Over thirty years ago scholars of contrastive rhetoric compared the writings of second language learners with native speakers of English. It was proposed that different cultures construct paragraphs differently because of varied ways of organizing arguments in each culture (Pietzman 44-
45). Scholars of contrastive linguistics now contest much of the concluding work of that study. But the important information for this project is to know that some difference in construction may be seen in the writing of second language learners who have not been taught the typical 'western' mode of logic. A teacher who realizes this ahead of time will be less likely to see these 'unusual' constructions as merely examples of poor or unorganized writing.

All these ESL considerations should not be problematic solely for the English teachers. As we move more and more into the area of writing in content disciplines, the second language student must be supported in all areas of the curriculum. While it may still seem an issue of primary importance to the English teachers, making content teachers aware of these difficulties means that all teachers are assisting second language learners to write well. For this reason, and not so that they may make extensive corrections, it is important that all teachers become aware of writing difficulties specific to certain populations in our schools.
Chapter II.

Theory and Research Behind Writing-to-Learn

Writing itself takes many forms and has many purposes. Academic writing has at least three purposes; showing mastery of the topic, learning to write within the specific discourse, and writing to learn. Each should be understood separately, although they all may be taught and used within each discipline.

The typical history essay is usually assigned for the student to demonstrate mastery of the subject learned. The purpose is communication, or clarification of communication, between the student and the teacher. Content area writing, on the other hand, is learning the discourse of each discipline and practicing communication within the forms and conventions of that particular discipline. Thirdly, writing to learn provides yet another purpose for writing. This writing is less formal, often non-graded, primarily for the student, and is less for communication than for mentally working through problems or discipline-specific topics. But each of these academic purposes can be enhanced through a campus-wide program of Writing across the Curriculum, or WAC.

Writing Across the Curriculum

Writing across the Curriculum is the idea, revived over twenty years ago, that expository writing should be used in every discipline, much the way scholars at the turn
of the century wrote their entrance exams for high school and college. For some programs students were even expected to write the essay in a foreign tongue: Greek, Latin, or French. The GI bill, which enabled many men and women to earn college degrees who previously would not have had that chance, also caused a bit of a clog in the system by their sheer numbers. It became too cumbersome to first admit to college and then grade in each class the number of papers required. One by one classes moved to shorter tests: multiple choice, short answer fill-ins, and even Scantron sheets, with perhaps a few brief essay questions on the side. Composition, and teaching how to write effectively, slowly became the job of the English department. Perhaps an even deeper tragedy is that this method of testing slowly moved down to secondary and even elementary schools, as the baby boomer generation, the children of the GI bill recipients, also began to swell the ranks of the growing classrooms.

The result was that after one generation, students did not write well. Quantity had triumphed, but at the expense of quality. Writing across the Curriculum, a writing revival, espouses the Process Writing, that is, writing as not only a finished, polished product, but with emphasis also being placed on the process of composing. The writing process teaches how one goes about beginning, organizing, rewriting, editing, and eventually polishing the written
material. The National Writing Project, with its local chapter here of the Inland Area Writing Project, was quite a stimulus to WAC, Writing Across the Curriculum. Over the years the National Writing project has trained and encouraged literally thousands of teachers in all disciplines to present writing in their classrooms and with their own particular subject matter (Plender).

The University of Connecticut's webpage, which they have named 'Writing Between the Lines,' presents for instructors a compilation of specific principles which are the basis of interdisciplinary writing classes and assignments. Acceptance of and commitment to these principles by content teachers will enable any class to take on the added dimension of a workable writing component. "This may necessitate a willingness to change what one is currently doing (Writing)." Actually the willingness to change may be the most difficult factor in this equation. Assuming the instructor, and the administration, are willing to make these subtle changes, what are the specific principles of Writing across the Curriculum? These principles include:

I. Writing will be integrated into every subject and be considered a part of the learning process.
II. All teachers will consider themselves writing teachers, or at least acknowledge that they are responsible for teaching writing.

III. "Writing is a process" or a course of action. (see below, page 60) It is not a one-time, one-shot action, but rather a series of events. These include generating ideas, producing a rough draft, revising the draft, editing for errors, and preparing the final, polished draft. Not all papers are taken completely through the process, however.

IV. Students learn to write by writing.

V. Instructors who teach writing should write themselves.

VI. We write for many reasons. Learning to write is not the same as writing to learn.

VII. The teacher’s response to students’ writing should be directed toward the process or purpose of the piece and is dependent on what stage of the process is being critiqued.

VIII. Responding to student writing is not editing that writing for spelling, grammar, or format corrections. One goal of this process is to return the responsibility for editing to the student or a peer-editing group of students.

IX. It is neither necessary nor desirable to grade everything a student writes, especially in the early
draft stage. Indeed, a premise of writing to learn, which follows, is that much of what we assign is to get the student thinking and organizing. The material they write in such assignments is for their eyes only.

X. Writing can be as individual and varied as the student. Do not accept that there is only one "correct" way to write. Most "rules" we have learned about writing make fine guidelines for beginners, but they were not intended to be concrete molds for student compositions.

These "Ten Commandments" or principles of WAC, constitute the premise which drives modern theory about the teaching of writing, from learning to write to writing to learn. The two together form a reciprocal bond between writing and learning.

Writing to Learn

Writing to Learn is surely an outgrowth or evolution of WAC. Its hallmark is the emphasis on active learning, on many brief, usually un-graded assignments, and on the placement of more responsibility for learning back onto the student. Too often teachers have complained that they work harder than their students do. Once a writing-to-learn program is understood and established, that burden of effort is returned to the shoulders of the students. They become the directors of their own learning, and the
teachers may often be able to assume the still very challenging role of facilitator to that learning.

As educators for most of the twenty-first century we were steeped in Behaviorism. B.F. Skinner ruled. Teaching was a matter of stimulus-response, and our job was to discover and employ the correct stimulus to achieve the 'response' which we called learning. After all, no one, until very recently, could actually look inside the brain to see how it worked. We could only see the results of whatever had happened, or had failed to happen, within that mysterious cavity. However, the newest discoveries in Brain Theory allow us at least a peek into the gray matter, and now the theories have changed. Today we can actually see into the brain and how it changes during concentration.

Twenty-first century educators have a broader understanding of the actual learning process within the brain, and this has encouraged a reexamining of the ways we teach. For example, science has learned that the processing brain makes its own meaning. In order to synthesize new information, the brain strives to makes its own connections and patterns. It creates meaning, interprets and integrates the various sensory stimuli, and in this way creates its own understanding.

This internal construction of meaning, called constructivism, changes the way teachers teach. Another way of knowing that learning has occurred, constructivism 'is
the understanding that knowledge is constructed within the mind of the learner (School)'. As students reflect on the new material presented, they lean on their own understanding of the world and weigh this new material against that old understanding. Learning, then, actually means adjusting their understanding to fit this new material.

This is a definitive change from the concept of student as a passive receiver of information. "In a constructivist classroom students are actively involved in the learning process and given the opportunity to construct knowledge based on their own background. Then, through reflection, they integrate that knowledge so that it is a part of a deeper understanding (School)." Just as the process of writing is at least as important as the product of the writing, so this process of struggling with new material and developing a new schema is at least as important as the actual mastery of the learned information. It is through struggle, after all, that the students begin to make the information their own. Perhaps this is the academic equivalent of 'No pain, no gain.'

Writing-to-learn becomes a part of that bigger picture because it more naturally encourages the students to engage material and, through their own reconstruction of the material, demonstrate what they have learned. Today we
place much more emphasis on active learning, or being
certain that the student is engaged with the material.
Also, teachers have moved from tests which simply require
repetition of facts learned to assessments which
authentically gauge if and to what extent the students have
integrated the new thinking into their own thinking.

Critical thinking, something our grandparents may have
called common sense, has become the new objective.
Employers are less concerned, they tell us, with the
material students may have learned but more with their
ability to locate, understand, evaluate, and solve
problems. Critical thinking is a very different thing to
teach than strictly a body of material. This ability,
however, may also prove to be more difficult to assess.
Nonetheless, everything we teach now should demonstrate the
critical thinking ability of our students. Lessons are
constructed, also, to teach to that ability. Writing,
fortunately, not only has the advantage of showing what
students know, but it can also demonstrate how students
think. An artfully designed piece of writing can show how
students organize, how they move from gathering
information, through cause and effect, and finally how they
arrive at new implications. Through composition, then, we
have a tool which assesses not only what the students have
learned, but whether or not they truly understand or are
simply parroting what they have read. This dynamic tool, Writing to Learn, uses the writing process to discover, organize, and present content material.

Writing to Learn is a process of clarifying thinking through writing. It forces the writers to go back to the material as their own writing shows them that they have gaps in their understanding of the material. This outgrowth of Writing across the Curriculum is a technique which is especially useful in content area disciplines to check for genuine understanding. While composing thoughts, the student is forced to explicitly present the material, complete with rationale and supporting evidence, leaving no room for hedging about whether or not the material has been understood. 'Writing is thinking made visible (Moshman 161)'. In a short written piece the student immediately demonstrates to the teacher having made, or not made, those actively engaged thinking connections with the material. And again, lest we forget, this activity places the responsibility for learning back onto the student. It is immediately clear to each student, as well as the instructor, whether or not the material has been understood.

For too long, however, both teachers and students in the social sciences have avoided the written dialog between them which could serve as a way to clarify and demonstrate understanding and mastery of historical material. 'Writing
helps us think about what we know, and of course it helps
our instructors see what we know and how we think (Marius
12). "This appears to be the perfect tool for history
teachers who want to teach, assess, and invigorate lax or
unchallenged students.

Writing-to-Learn in History

Having students write in a social studies classroom
is, of course, not a new idea. Who can forget the dreaded
Term Paper in high school American Government class? But
what has been the purpose of writing in this discipline,
and has that purpose changed over the years?

As for back as the 1972 study (Barnes & Shemilt),
content area teachers have expressed different reasons for
assigning written material. This particular study of 246
British teachers revealed two different views of writing.
Among some teachers writing was seen as 'a way to encode
and repeat a traditional body of knowledge.' This was
termed 'The Transmission view.' On the other hand, the
'Interpretation view' saw writing as a 'way for students to
explore a subject area and gain understanding new concepts
in the process of writing about them (Applebee 59)'. This
Transmission view is writing to communicate, while the
exploration of The Interpretation View is writing to learn.

Both types of writing are still useful and necessary
in content area writing, since both transmission of facts
and interpretation of data are just as important now as
they were thirty years ago. Transmission writing is
necessary for assessment of whether or not the material has
been communicated to the student. The higher level thinking
skills a teacher wants from the class require that the
students can also interpret the material. Both skills
require different types of writing, and will, of course,
require different types of assignments.

Teachers in social science who participated in this
study demonstrated a high degree of flexibility and
integration of the several purposes for assigning writing.
When the 246 content instructors were questioned about
exactly why they encouraged writing, the researchers were
able to isolate and list twelve specific reasons. These
included:

- to remember information,
- to correlate experiences with the topic,
- to test learning of content,
- to shape imaginative experiences,
- to summarize class material,
- to express feelings, to explore out-of-class material,
- to practice writing mechanics,
- to force thinking,
- to apply concepts to new situations,
- to teach proper essay form, and finally
to test clear expression (Applebee 61).

Next, these reasons for assigning writing were plotted on a graph whose poles included examples of assignments which stressed these four areas: Concepts, Information, Personal Experience, and Learning Skills. The social science teachers, based on their assignments, placed most nearly dead center. That is, their reasons for assigning writing included, almost evenly, the dual purposes of both transmission and interpretation. History teachers, then, have much to gain by employing writing in their curriculum, and they have a history of assigning writing which covers a broad spectrum of uses.

Content area teachers have a much wider array of types of writing available to them than ever before. Writing to Learn as a tool encourages many formats, from quick-writes to formal final editions of a polished paper. Before the task is assigned, of course, the instructor must first decide the specific purpose of the assignment. Here are just a few of the many ideas available to the interested and adventurous newcomer to this area of content extension and assessment, writing to learn.

Quick-writes

The quick-write, sometimes called a free-write or five-minute write, is an informal tool which has the student write for four to five minutes without stopping.
Because it can be used both to focus on what lies ahead in the lesson or to draw together what has just happened in class, this method can be used either at the beginning or the end of class. Before the class discussion actually begins, a brief quick-write can be used to show students what they already know about the subject. It can raise the level of class discussion because the students are reminded of what they can already bring to the discussion. A quick-write also actively involves more students, as each student is giving a response and not just the few singled out for comment or questions. Coming at the end of a class, however, a quick-write refocuses everyone on what was just learned and allows students to raise new questions and look toward the next lesson.

The purpose of the quick-write is to recall a learning experience. It provides another opportunity for the student to process information. Because of the relative unstructured nature of the task, the free flow of writing stimulates the student to think through what is being written. Another benefit to the instructor and student alike is that this method of freeing up the thinking enables a student to follow thoughts in any direction, without the encumbrances of grammar or form or even supporting details. In other words, the sole purpose of this time is to allow, or force, thinking.
Reflective Writing

Another form useful for writing to learn is the reflective paper. This may start out as a focused free-write, but the purpose is to work out a problem, or reflect back on a completed project. It is a meta-cognitive piece that allows the students to think through a process or reflect back to how and why they approached a problem the way they did. A reflection on a work already completed reinforces for the student the process used and prepares them to do even better when they approach similar problems in the future.

Journals

Journals can be used in any content field, and because they come in so many forms and are so flexible, their use is only limited by the imagination or experience of the instructor. Journals are kept to reflect on the learning, to solve a problem or think through a possible solution, to synthesize new information with old experiences, to communicate between students or between a student and the teacher, to analyze the student’s own thinking process, and to respond to what is being learned or read.

Journals can be a source of frequent short writings to explore developing ideas, either between students or between students and the teacher. They can also be a playground or sounding board for students to experiment and develop their own emerging ideas. Journals further allow
the instructor to assign topics that encourage important mental reflections but do not necessarily have to be graded. In the process of creating good writing some script is discovery writing, some is for summarizing material, some for reacting to ideas which have been presented by others. Students may begin the class with a five-minute free-write which prepares the mind to introduce discussion.

Such activities accustom students to writing as part of their regular thinking, talking, and reading activities and can help them understand the necessarily unshaped nature of draft writing. Materials such as journal entries and five-minute writes must be molded before they can become products submitted for grading. Peer grading and peer response sessions conducted in class when papers or drafts are due can open students’ eyes to the possibilities of organized writing as critical thinking. Practice in writing timed tests and peer grading of those tests will reinforce the need for planning, organization, and revision (White 41).

Activities such as these teach students that there are several uses for writing. One important purpose for writing is to organize thinking. This is writing-to-learn.

Grading

Few, if any, teachers are thoroughly satisfied with even their own system of grading. We have a set of five letters, A through F, which must somehow cover over one
hundred different students to tabulate an educational value. Why expect teachers to embrace another layer and form of grading by adding the dimension of writing? How will this new dimension clarify the grading process?

Assessment is never objective or clean; it is never painlessly resolved. In other words, grading never occurs outside the complicated issues of interpersonal relationships, and academic writing never occurs outside the complicated issues of grading. The key is not to look for an easy and painless method of assessment, but rather to examine the ways in which grades operate in our teaching and then to ask, what can we do to limit the potentially negative influences of grades on the writing process and on the teacher-student relationship (Tobin 58).

Our biggest complaint, grades, is simply a fact of teacher life with which we must deal. Like it or not, we are responsible for giving a meaningful grade. As content teachers we can grade the content of the writing and the evidence of interpretation. We have graded those aspects before. For the moment, consider only grading of the content. This is often done with a holistic grade, or a grade using a four to six point rubric. Content, rather than form, is useful for history teachers who use writing as part of their assessment. A more fully developed discussion of grammar and form will follow later in this paper.
Susan H. McLeod, professor of English at Washington State University, has her students keep both writing journals and portfolios of their work in progress. McLeod confesses that 'while I do grade each student's collective work at midterm and at the end of the course, I do not grade individual student papers, trying to provide what (Peter) Elbow calls an 'evaluation-free zone (McLeod 42)'.

Susan McLeod, however, is a university professor with different codes and different policies than are faced by secondary school teachers, grades seven through twelve. With all the interest and emphasis on school reform, might non-graded journals be considered as a warm-fuzzy by administrators?

Professor McLeod discusses her class and its requirements in the first chapter of her book, Notes on the Heart: Affective Issues in the Writing Classroom.

Freshman composition at this institution requires academic writing based on multi-cultural readings. The writing tasks are demanding intellectually--students are often asked to read and think about emotional, value-laden issues and then write in the discourse of the academy, that is, in an analytical, objective fashion (3).

Certainly it is not only possible to write in an academic style covering interesting, timely, affective material, it is very conducive and adaptable to the social studies classrooms. Such tasks allow and encourage the
students to actively engage the ideas and events of the past or other fields within the realm of social science.

Still, this issue of grading writing will certainly be an added issue, as 'assessment and curriculum are always inseparably linked and we can't (or shouldn't) alter one without altering the other (Tobin 62)'. Grading can be streamlined by insuring that our students have straightforward directions, even written rubrics, which make the assignment as clear as possible. Students may be asked to: name, cite an example, explain, or summarize (Tobin 62). Each of these specific terms will have to be demonstrated to show students the differences among types of answers. And each asks slightly different question, employing different types of writing tasks.

Further in her book, McLeod discusses the recent history of both the beliefs and research concerning grades in this country. It is an issue and a book which all teachers will find enlightening. She begins Chapter three on motivation and writing with the following epigraph: The chief impediments to learning are not cognitive. It is not that students cannot learn; it is that they do not wish to. If educators invested a fraction of the energy they now spend trying to transmit information in trying to stimulate students’ enjoyment of learning, we could achieve better results. Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi, ‘Literacy and Intrinsic Motivation (43)’.
Open the next staff gathering or department meeting with this quote and see just how alive and vocal your staff can become. ‘Sure, I can put on the best ‘dog and pony’ show learned at the last in-service, and I can be as creative and inventive a teacher as Socrates. But if little Johnny or Jorge or Sophema doesn’t want to work, nothing will happen.’ This would be a typical lament. Motivation is often the biggest hurdle content teachers face in the classroom. Why? What has changed to make motivating our students so difficult?

Anyone can have pity for teachers in inner city schools whose children seem to face almost impossible odds against violence, poverty, and lack of opportunity. But teachers in model schools in suburban, rather homogenous, communities make the same complaint. Increasingly, these teachers say, their students are becoming apathetic, impatient, self-centered, overwhelmed, and harder to motivate; they demand more, yet aren’t willing to work for it. According to a recent poll of more than 21,000 teachers by the Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching, 71 percent of teachers agree that students in their school ‘want to do just enough to get by (Thoughtful 14).’

The work ethic among students seems to be a thing of the past. What has brought about such a change? Is it possible to motivate students so that they develop intrinsic rewards for their efforts?
Mary Koepke, in the same article cited above, also asks what has happened to the work ethic among many members of this present generation. She attributes this loss to a lack of optimism about the future. Koepke contends that too much bad news has replaced the struggle for the good life with a belief that working hard may not make any difference at all in the long run.

Young people today seem to have lost some of the natural optimism that has always been characteristic of youth. Only 17 percent of high schoolers feel that life in America will get better 10 years from now, according to the 1992 Scholastic Poll of American Youth. "Kids used to be basically optimistic," says Elkind [author of The Hurried Child] "But there isn't this sense of progress that was once present (Thoughtful 14)."

If we are facing a significant proportion of students in our classes who have this apathetic spirit and lack of intrinsic motivation, it would be beneficial to our program to attempt to restore that intrinsic feeling or motivation and reward, even if only to a segment of our school population. We can not teach until we find a way to motivate.

Professor McLeod cites several studies and changes in the way we have viewed motivation over the years. She compares what we think should happen with behavior modification and how grades can affect effort to what the
research shows actually happens as a result of rewarding students. Rewards can actually change a student’s inner motivation. The intrinsic versus extrinsic motivation truly changes for many students with the introduction of rewards. By the end of the chapter McLeod suggests that 'the situation is rather more complex than Csikszentmihalyi's statement ... suggests (47).’ But the points have been made: motivation is critical, and only the student can decide to learn. ‘It is not that students cannot learn; it is that they do not wish to.’ Could there be better intrinsic rewards for students than the reward of seeing their own work acknowledged by the highest authority known to secondary students; their peers? Does anything increase the ability to write faster than knowing that one CAN write?

Before we can expect to have our students produce polished academic writing we have to make sure they know they can write worthwhile material. One way we can encourage students to produce a larger body of academic writing is to first show them they can. If the teacher is always the only audience for whom our students write, all but the most ambitious may soon lose interest. Peer review of students’ work expands the audience, engages the students who would rather write for their peers than for us, encourages students to question one another and
themselves, and takes less grading time from the instructor. Additionally, it places the responsibility of thinking and editing where it rightfully belongs; with the students.

Peer Review

Knowing ahead of time the possible or even probable pitfalls of peer review can prevent some culture shock for instructors new to peer review. For example,

(y)ou can’t just ask students to work in small groups. You have to show them how to work together. You can’t use group work every once in a while. It takes weeks and weeks for students to learn to trust each other. You need to stick with it for a whole semester. You have constantly to monitor every group in the room to make sure they are on-task. You have to work harder in the peer workshop than in the traditional one. Don’t allow negative comments. Negative comments can cripple a whole group (Tobin 130).

As with most of our goals in teaching, progress is seldom happenstance. When done well, peer revision groups can be used to powerfully show students what they have written versus what they may THINK they have written, when their own text is seen through the eyes of other students. While both peer and self-assessment can be a painful and intimidating process, it is a necessary first step on the
road to proper revision. Teachers look for ways to make those painful, self-discovery steps a bit less painful.

'One place to start is the writing log or journal, a place of thinking and discovering but not for finished work. The writing log becomes not only a mine for writing ideas but also a place for writing that is not a fixed form, including discovery drafts. One important difference between the writing habits of skilled and unskilled writers is that unskilled writers hate to discard anything from an early draft, whereas skilled writers are always cutting and rearranging their work. The writing log, unlike a more unfinished draft of a paper, will not trap students into thinking that the writing is carved in stone'(White 143).

Both grades and peer review issues can be minimized with careful construction of peer review sheets. These sheets not only keep working students directed; they almost allow the students to grade themselves.

Adjunct professor Barbara Giles uses peer-editing groups very effectively. And while she makes the use of them seem simple to a casual observer, I learned from one semester as her intern that the workshops, her grading of them, and her methods of grading which include the peer response component, are very rigorous and exacting. Students who do NOT participate or do not heed the constructive suggestions of their peer groups are counseled in conference as well as through teacher notes on their papers. Eventually the grades suffer for students who do
not seriously critique, edit, and/or actively rewrite their material. A copy of her peer-editing guide follows:

**Peer Responding**

Writer’s Name_____________

Peer Responder’s Name_____________

(Writer: Attach this to the draft the peer responder reads and responds on.)

Peer Responder: Ask the writer what he/she would particularly like you to think about as you read/listen to his/her paper in addition to the ideas listed below. Use the back of the page if necessary.

Writers areas of concern:
1.- In several sentences, state what you like best about this paper.
2.- Respond to the title.
3.- Has the essay fulfilled the purpose of the assignment? If yes, tell how. If no, tell why and give suggestions for improvement.
4.- Has the writer successfully avoided plagiarism? Indicate any problem areas.
5.- Underline the thesis on the draft. Sign the draft.
6.- Comment on organization.
7.- Comment on introduction and conclusion.
8.- Comment on the style and tone.
9.- Who is the audience?
10.- What else would you do to this paper if you were turning it in for a grade (Giles)?

Paper Load

No teacher on campus has more papers to read and grade than the English teacher. It would be wise, therefore, to go to these experts to ask for advice in what could easily become a burdensome task.

Suggestions on how to handle the paper load:
Use student writing logs. Skim and respond without editing or even grading.

- Construct each assignment with care. Distribute written copies of the task. Allow students to examine excellent samples of previous responses to the assignment. Students are then more likely to submit better work, needing less grading time.
- Employ peer evaluation groups to respond to early drafts and even grade subsequent drafts.
- Make liberal use of short writing prompts, journal entries, response logs, or free-writes to which you may often merely give check-off grades.
- Remember that early drafts do not require liberal red marking, editing, or proofreading. Read early drafts for content. Students should edit their own drafts, or peer-edit.
• Find or develop rubrics, the 6-point scale, self-assessment, and group discussions of individual papers to cut exhaustive response time.

• Keep written remarks to a few main points. Raise questions. Do not do the work of thinking for the student.

Remember that only a few papers need to be carried through the entire revision process for a final draft grade (White 145). These suggestions make it clear that adding writing to the curriculum need not be a burden for the instructor. A few times practicing these ideas in the classroom structure will surely open the eyes of the teacher to the thinking and progress of the students as nothing else can.
CHAPTER III.

Why Some History Teachers Do Not Use Writing

Teaching universities have been using Writing across the Curriculum for over two decades. These, presumably, are the institutions which train most of our teachers. Why, then, do so few history teachers use this technique, despite the best evidence that it greatly assists in teaching? I suspect that they feel they are not equipped to teach writing skills, which they see as ‘part of the English teacher’s job.’ Yet, who is better trained to teach writing as it is necessary in the history class than the history teacher, who has, after all, written the papers necessary to earn a degree in the social sciences? Or perhaps the history teacher imagines composition as another layer of cumbersome grading, the very reason they chose not to teach English in the first place. Yet, the emphasis is not on grading, and certainly not on grading for form or grammar, but as a means for the student to demonstrate that meaningful learning has taken place. A well-constructed writing assignment can show whether or not the student has mastered a level of learning required by the teacher. This may not require more than a check off grade or a brief conference with the student. While teaching students to read and write in each discipline, all teachers can increase understanding through carefully-constructed
written assignments, not only with an essay, that old stand-by of content teachers, but also through journals, letters, notebooks, problem-solving situations, and free-writes. For example, after specific reading and/or a lecture covering the Black Plague which swept through Europe six hundred years ago, students may be asked to write a letter to the local doctor while assuming the persona of a peasant who is picking up a cartload of bloated bodies to be carried outside of town each morning. Or perhaps another student could write as a mother who has already lost a child and husband to this dreaded pestilence and now suspects she may herself be infected. On another day the assignment could be to have the students exchange papers and write replies to these letters from the local doctor who is wrestling himself with the new information he is learning on the spread of the disease. Assignments such as these address several purposes:

- they actively engage the student in the material
- they capture the student into a new point of view
- they make the student think like an historian
- they insure that the student addresses various audiences
- they employ creativity
- they introduce authentic problem-solution scenarios
- they assure that the student will remember the
information longer, because it has been integrated into the student's own schemata, or knowledge base, and also into their affective domain.

Asking the History Teachers

I began this project with some of my own thoughts about why some teachers, especially history teachers, seem reluctant to use writing in their classes. Students are more than willing to share their reasons and complaints, but I would only be guessing about teachers' reasons if I did not ask them. A survey of history teachers seemed a next logical step toward finding out.

The questionnaire that follows is based on the suggestions taken from Professor Richard Marius, *A Short Guide to Writing about History*. He makes assumptions about why more content teachers do not use composition. As a professor of history he seems as puzzled as an English instructor that more social science teachers fail to add writing assignment to their agendas for the course. Since so many teaching colleges express the importance of WAC, why is there so little of it done in high schools across the state? What about other states? WHY are history teachers reluctant to assign more writing? Or is writing still viewed as the domain of the English teacher?

Dr. Marius does make some fairly obvious speculations, which are reflected in the following questionnaire that was
distributed to social science teachers, grades six through twelve, in the Alvord Unified School District in Riverside. Discussions in teachers' lounges and at workshops across the state had this writer in agreement with the speculations he offers.

As a middle school teacher, grades seven and eight, I operate under the assumption that my students will be asked to write many term papers and research papers in high school, so I expect that term papers routinely are assigned, but the issue of shorter essays is unsettled. It is these shorter essays and journal-type pieces that are of most interest to this paper. The attitude of history teachers toward multiple, short assignments, is also unpredictable, as is the percentage of present teachers who were trained after the introduction of a writing component into the college and university curricula. One assumes that if teachers are trained in teaching through writing, they will be more likely to take that training into the classrooms. However, if that is true, why are high school students less prepared than ever to write academic papers once they reach college? Can we locate this breakdown in the teaching and practice of writing, specifically within history?
QUESTIONNAIRE

1. - What was your undergraduate major in college?

2. - About how often were you required to write a term paper as part of the final grade in the coursework in your major?
   A. very often  B. sometimes  C. not at all

3. - Did you often write short essays for these classes?
   A. very often  B. sometimes  C. not at all

4. - Were you required to take a writing course in conjunction with your major?
   Yes__  No__

5. - When did you earn your undergraduate degree?_______
   From which state or foreign country?__________

6. - What courses among the social sciences do you teach?

7. - What grades? ___________

8. - How often do you require a short essay? (less than 3 pages)
   A. very often  B. sometimes  C. not at all

9. - How often do you require a term paper? How long do you expect this term paper to be?
   A. very often  B. sometimes  C. not at all
   A. less than 3 pages  B. 3-10 pages  C. longer than 10 pages
10.- If you do NOT often require essay writing, which of these reasons apply?
A) Composition is within the realm of the English department.
B) I do not feel qualified to teach writing skills or grade the mechanics of writing.
C) Taking students to the library and going through the entire process necessary to write a theme takes too much time from my curriculum.
D) Reading one essay per student would take hours; hours which I do not have.
E) Others: Please explain:

11.- If you were given specific teaching strategies that could be used within your classroom or easily adapted to fit your classes, would you assign more writing?
A.- yes B.- no C.- maybe

I DO require frequent writing from my students and would be willing to share my ideas with you. You may contact me at:
School______________________________
Address_____________________________
Results of the Questionnaire:

About thirty teachers of social studies and history, grades six to twelve, took the time to answer and return the questionnaire. These were teachers with various levels of experience from the Alvord Unified School District in Riverside.

Some of the answers were quite as expected from the reading of Marius and thirteen years spent frequenting the staff lounge three or four times a week; students are not asked to write more often because:

- Writing is not required in the curriculum or by this particular administration.
- My students struggle so just to read; how can I expect them to have much writing ability?
- My students are very low, and all I can expect is a few sentences.
- It takes so very much time.

Other reasons, however, were not expected. One seventh grade teacher cited what was perceived as an unfriendly, even rigid attitude of the librarian. Another explained that with two thirds of the students in the class
being Special Day, a level of special education below Resource, very much rigorous drafting or even free-writes were stretching the boundaries. A major goal, it was explained, was proof that students could write the five-paragraph essay by the end of the year. While this goal brings gooseflesh to the necks of many a college writing instructor, having some type of heuristic for students to follow allows teachers and students alike to see and use a constructed pattern. Hopefully the students, having learned one construct, will have the ability and inclination to spread their wings and try a more original form. Hopefully students will learn that most often essays do not fall into a pattern of exactly five paragraphs. The theory is that if a student can write, organize, and provide details and support for that long of an essay, composition writing has been mastered.

The biggest surprise is that so few of the respondents at the high school level require lengthy term papers. Over ninety percent of the teachers indicated assigning short papers 'very often' or 'sometimes,' while about seventy-five percent indicated that they require term papers only 'sometimes' or even 'not at all.' This is a major surprise for a teacher who assumes she is preparing students to write frequent high school term papers in all subjects.
Surely the most encouraging revelation from this survey is that nearly every teacher indicated a willingness to try new strategies if they were presented and seemed appropriate and adaptable by the instructor for their class. Only one teacher indicated no new ideas would be of interest, but only because so much was already being done in that class already with several types of writing assignments given frequently. Several teachers were willing and perhaps even anxious to share their better writing assignments for the sake of this project.

Why Some History Teachers Do Use Writing

Students struggle in our classes for a variety of reasons. Several teachers in the above questionnaire mourned the fact that basic reading is a major factor in the inability of their students to master the content. Since we often ask students to write reflective or even analysis papers about a selection of content reading, we are often asking them to conquer two mountains at once. If we only ask that students write papers to demonstrate mastery of the written material, we end up testing not only their ability to write, but also their ability to read and comprehend. The problem may be complicated even further if the student is a non-native speaker confronting vocabulary, idioms, plus the specific content ideas, all of which may be totally new. The usual analysis paper allows no room for
these students to show us their 'bafflement' of the work, or their unique struggles (Newkirk 7). Writing to learn is a teaching tool which allows the student to explore the topic, while at the same time allowing the student and teacher both to see just where the confusion and misunderstanding lie. Why might this tool still be ignored in some history classrooms at present?

For a history teacher who has not previously used writing as a learning tool, it is easy to plead incompetence as a writer. But no one suggests that any teacher should be set adrift on a new raft with no map and no oars. While this may be a new pathway for some instructors, these are by no means uncharted waters.

The University of Connecticut Homepage, in its efforts to see that more of its instructors use deliberate and effective writing in their courses, offers Eight Myths and Reality in Teaching Writing across the Curriculum. The following suggestions are adapted from that page:

Myth # 1: I have to be an expert to teach writing.

Reality: Not true. You only have to know and respect the principles of process writing. (See above page 19)

Myth # 2: I have to enjoy writing.

Reality: Again, not true. However, you must believe that writing is important. And the more you write yourself, the more you are likely to begin enjoying it.
Myth #3: I’m not a writing teacher. I can’t teach writing.

Reality: We all write! And most of us write more than we realize; grocery lists, letters of all kinds and for all purposes, lesson plans, agendas and minutes, memos, e-mail. While most of us worry more about teaching the mechanics of writing, the part of the equation we need most to teach our students is how to write in our specific disciplines. Content teachers are more aware of these parameters than even English teachers.

Myth #4: Teaching writing will eat up too much of my valuable content time.

Reality: Teaching writing to learn will enable you to do three things at once: Teach writing. Teach content. Teach writing as the discourse of your discipline.

Myth #5: I can’t even imagine handling the added paper load I see among the composition instructors.

Reality: Assignments must be constructed carefully to be sure the students are working harder than the instructor is. Remember, too, most writing will consist of informal, non-graded pieces that may require only a check-off grade. Also, deliberate time spent teaching peer-editing skills can cut grading time considerably. And finally, even with the drafts carried beyond the initial stages, it will only be necessary to grade for one or two specific points on
each paper. Both you and the student will know ahead of time exactly what will be the instructor's focus; key terms or concepts, sources, organization, conventions of writing, responsibility and team effort, to name a few.

**Myth #6:** I only have so much time. Writing to Learn will distract from the time I need to teach Learning to Write.

**Reality:** Learning to write and writing to learn should be one smooth process. As with almost any activity, good practice makes for improved results.

**Myth #7:** For 'real writers' the work is elegant and easy. For me writing is difficult and messy. I struggle because I'm not a real writer. How can you expect me to teach my students to become writers?

**Reality:** A real writer is anyone who writes. (See myth #3) And in truth, writing is a difficult and messy business, even for most published writers. Remember that we usually only see the polished drafts from 'real writers'. Practice with the composing process will show both you and your students that it is a step-by-step process that can be learned and refined.

**Myth #8:** I was not trained in process writing. I remember the painful lessons of spelling, rules of grammar, and rules of organization. Since that is the way I was taught, that is the only way I could teach writing.
**Reality:** As teachers we always try to stay abreast of the latest research. We attend conferences, workshops, and seminars to learn new techniques, strategies, and methodologies. It is never too late to learn new ways to think and new approaches to our teaching (Writing).

**Getting Into the Trenches, or, I Don’t Want to Know!**

There is one more excuse which we can not ignore. When we read material written by our students we get to know them on a much more personal level. Writing which requires any level of analysis, example, or evaluation will open up the minds and the spirits of our charges. On occasion this writing may even reveal to us more about our students than we care to know. As teachers our duty to students in this regard is two-fold: We are legally bound to report anything which looks like danger or abuse to our students. Secondly, as responsible adults we are duty-bound to teach, or at least recognize, the whole child. Teachers have the obligation of not looking the other way when a child of any age needs a responsible shoulder on which to lean. Of course it is a good idea to let students know that they should not write to you anything of a very sensitive nature if they expect you to ignore it. Explain your legal obligations to the students.

However, the problem of outright abuse is not the only one faced by today’s youth. The demographics from the last
decade of the twentieth century alert us that students today come to us with problems that spill over into their ability to learn. Therefore, we can not ignore them. For example,

- 1 of 4 came from homes touched by poverty
- 14% were children of teenage mothers
- 15% were handicapped, either physically or mentally, frequently because of low birth weight or drug use during their fetal development
- 15% were immigrants and had to learn a new language
- 15% were the products of unmarried parents
- 40 lived in broken homes before they reached 18
- 10% came from poorly educated or illiterate parents
- between a fourth and a third were latchkey children, coming home to an empty house
- more than a quarter did not finish school (Typical)

For many children, teachers will be the best role model they will see and interact with day after day. As adults who have chosen to work with children, it may sometimes be our responsibility to show maturity, wisdom, humor, compassion, and empathy when no other adults are readily available to them. While some teachers may feel this is not why they went into teaching, it is impossible to ignore the needs of a hurting child. It is, after all, part of the reason we are in the humanities (Thoughtful 2).
Arguments for Using Writing in History Class

English teachers have long used both historical fiction and expository writing to encourage students to make their own connections with the material. They know that once a student has engaged the material by analyzing it and writing about it, the material ‘belongs’ to the student. Can history teachers, likewise, use composition to give meaning to their own content material?

Many believe that as teachers strive to encourage the understanding of historical events, composition can be a powerful tool. Much as historical fiction has brought many reluctant students to enjoy the history they find nestled among the plots and characters of novels, so perhaps we can snare disinclined students into accepting the persona of a genuine historical character or characterization as students write to a particular audience or about a specific historical event.

Process Writing

A major component of Writing across the Disciplines, and also writing to learn, is the writing process. Simply stated, this means that the actual steps in composing a piece of writing are as important as the finished product. While a child at a birthday party may only see and enjoy the decorated cake, the pastry chef enjoys and is deliberate at each step of the preparation of that
masterpiece. In the same way, the writing process stresses several steps toward writing a polished article for publication. The final draft, or published article, is significant. However, the instructor is careful and deliberate to teach to the entire process.

Numerous charts list various stages of the process, but they all contain certain elements, such as pre-writing, drafting, rewriting, editing, and polishing for the final draft. Many, however, stress terms that are understood only among English majors, thus keeping alive that fearful and seemingly adversarial approach to the process. One very friendly approach, however, is the one shown below, offered by the Undergraduate Writing Center of the University of Texas at Austin on the university's webpage. It was adapted from Writing Arguments, a book by Rampage and Bean, New York: Macmillan, 1992, 48-49.

1. The Starting Point: In this initial step, brainstorm ideas, issues, quotes, assumptions; anything you think you may want to use as you first examine the goal of the assignment.

2. The Exploration and Rehearsal: Discuss each of your ideas in a small group, adding the new ideas to your brainstorm sheet as they come. Begin some preliminary organization; idea log, focused free-
writing, mind-mapping, graphic organizers, outlining, webbing; whatever works for you.

3. Write the Discovery Draft: "Write like the wind." Concentrate on getting all your ideas down on paper. Be clear in your ideas. Do not let grammar and/or spelling slow you down at this point.

4. The Revision or "Seeing Again": Leave the paper for at least a few minutes. Overnight would be better. You will have had time to think through your ideas, and more will surely come. As you look with fresh eyes, focus on coherence, flow, logical organization, strengthening points of argument or example. This is a good time for a peer review.

5. Editing: This is the polishing stage in preparation for the final draft. Make each word say exactly what you want it to say. The final inspection is to correct all errors in spelling, format, grammar, and punctuation.

6. Write the Final Draft: This is often the only piece seen by the instructor. Before this point, the work will primarily be done by the student and the peer editing group.

This is the basic step-by-step of the writing process. For a major term paper it may be necessary, and certainly
wise, to get one last editing or revision critique before
turning in a paper as near-perfect as you can make it.

The Historian as Writing Teacher

It would be simplistic to suggest that English
teachers have all the answers, and social studies
instructors can easily adapt and adopt their lesson plan
ideas and writer’s workshops to suit history. The field of
English, which covers literature, composition, and
rhetoric, is not a static and universally agreed-upon area,
either. ‘The teaching of writing has been and continues to
be highly politicized within English departments and within
the profession (Myths)’. It should come as little surprise,
then, that at least some of this tension and disagreement
should spill into the content fields when it comes to
writing. If English teachers do not agree on the ‘best’
method for teaching composition, does that not free the
content teachers from trying? Not when they put the best
interests of the student first. Students must learn to
write in every field, and there is no way around that fact.
Each teacher who works with a student is responsible, in
part, for the skills the student needs to succeed, not only
in academia, but in everyday life. That certainly includes
the ability to write an effective paper, letter, business
report, or summary.

Perhaps it also would be
comforting to learn that literature
teachers struggle with expository
writing as much as some social science teachers may struggle with 'the novel.' Writing about ideas may well be the hardest genre to sponsor in school, especially at the middle-and high-school level, where the English teacher teaches English only. It's easy and obvious to ask students in an English class to write what they read: narratives and poetry, which invite them to examine their own experiences or imagine others'. It takes a different kind of effort to push out into the world of ideas 'social, moral, ethical, political' and pull it back into the writing workshop. I think we need to make the effort. Argument, opinion, and persuasion should be nurtured as part of every writing workshop and every life. Writing teachers need to plant the seeds for those moments of change, when a student stops being a victim or allowing others to be victimized and writes as an agent, someone who uses written language to act (Atwell 457).

Surely discovering this power in writing is the purpose behind teaching writing. If we expect the next generation to affect change, we must show them the change is possible through the written expression of their well-constructed ideas. Surely that is the 'empowerment' we mean in our mission statements written at every level of public education from the individual school to the California State Department of Education.

Paper Load

Some teachers in the social studies arena, especially those who have not used writing before, may, in their efforts to be valiant editors of student work, actually be
counterproductive in their initial exuberance. The Manoa Writing Program has constructed a web page titled ‘Handling the Paper Load.’ This site has compiled research and suggestions especially for content teachers. The following suggestions come from this source.

Instructors who are not familiar with the recent research in composition may feel compelled to mark all grammar and spelling errors on each paper they receive. But research reveals that if students are deliberately taught to proofread and are then held accountable to reasonable standards, they will catch more than 60% of the errors themselves. When we correct the errors, we inadvertently teach students to rely on us to continue to do so. Instead, we can turn the tables, making students their own copy-editors by considering and using at least some of the following suggestions:

- Indicate errors only on the first page
- Mark 'representative errors'
- Place a mark in the margins to indicate an error
- Return papers which have obviously not been proof-read
- Form peer editing circles right in the class

Conscientious teachers often feel they must read every paper which students write. However, research reveals that students can be expected to produce quick-writes and journals, both of which are only infrequently collected,
and then perhaps only for a check-off grade. For example, quick-writes can be employed at the beginning or end of a class to encourage students to either focus or reach closure. Quick-writes may be used to stimulate new ideas or avenues when the discussion lags. They can be used to offer and compare definitions of vocabulary terms. The students can then hammer out their own compromises or debates on the meaning of the specific terms being used in the class. The purpose of these brief writing episodes is to engage the student with the material. Since the focus is on thinking and not on error-free composition, no corrections are necessary.

Some faculty may still think that a teacher must grade or evaluate every written assignment collected. But again, the research shows otherwise. No matter how satisfied the instructor may be with the detailed comments which have been painstakingly contributed at the end or in the margins of a "well-graded" paper, the efforts are usually lost, as students tend to shrug them off, perhaps not even reading them. This is especially true if the student is not expected to use those comments to polish toward another draft. "Non-evaluated assignments can work well and even be the most frequent type of writing used in a writing-intensive class (Manoa)."
Minimal grading can be given for journals, quick-writes, and other informal pieces, such as the check for completion, and perhaps a check + for an especially good response. Another suggestion is to award points for completed responses. Students may be allowed to choose a selected number of these responses, turning them in at the end of the marking period for evaluation and grading. This gives the students another opportunity to evaluate their own work, and it gives them a choice in selecting their "best" work.

Another myth which dies hard is that 'more is better' when it comes to teacher response on a paper. Copious suggestions are felt to be necessary, especially when discussing the argumentation of a paper. Yet certainly teachers can remember the horror we felt when papers were returned literally dripping with red ink. And did all of us conscientiously correct those copious errors, placing each lesson into our permanent memory bank? Probably not! By now we have learned that it is best to concentrate on just a few areas of analysis. A student can remember or internalize the learning of only a few concepts at a time (Giles).

A specific suggestion which appeared in November of 1988 on the Teacher2Teacher listserve is a reminder of what we know to do but often forget: be specific in suggestions.
A technique of motivating students, which most teachers learned in education methods classes, has to do with feedback. Use the word 'because' after both praise and suggestions. 'Your paper is unclear because' or your paper was interesting because....' The more specific our comments, even if they are few, the more students will find them helpful in revising the paper or writing later pieces (Stacie).

Certainly not all papers must or even should be taken through several drafts to the polished version. For the assignments that will be taken through several drafts, it is a misconception still held by some that a second draft necessarily doubles the work of the instructor. However, why would a teacher write constructive comments unless the student can be expected to improve the work or the grade by considering and using the advice given? Our students, research shows us, may spend five minutes reading the comments we poured twenty minutes into constructing, or even just throw out the paper after scanning for the grade. It would be far better to respond in a corrective, helpful manner to a first draft, and save a brief evaluation for the final draft (Manoa).

Making History Classes More Writing Intensive

The more recent 'writing-intensive' content classes in colleges and universities can be adapted to fit our AP
classes and perhaps even regular history classes, at least in their intent. We can certainly borrow ideas from them. Several can be modified for junior high through regular high school history class.

For someone who has not seen a 'writing intensive' college course before, it may appear that students are assigned three to five unrelated compositions. Each paper, then, will require a good deal of evaluative effort from the instructor, with much time-consuming responding on each paper. But here again the research shows otherwise. As in the 306 classes at Cal-State, with each project building on the previous one, until a final, major paper is produced, the semester can be constructed around a single polished final draft. This kind of an assignment serves to focus students into an in-depth analysis, with each assignment gradually increasing in difficulty. Teachers also find that their efforts are more 'cost-effective', since by the time the final paper is collected, the teacher has read and responded to various sections of the paper already and is quite familiar with the topic, the writer, and the goals of that writer (Manoa).

The issue of time is a rational argument for having removed writing from the social studies curriculum. After all, if a history teacher assigns even a one-page essay to students, it may mean as many as 200 pages of reading for that instructor. While 40 in a classroom is not the norm,
it still does exist in this state. The teacher who is new to Writing-to-Learn strategies may be relieved to learn that not all the work must be read, and very little of it should be heavily edited. Editing is the work of the student, either alone or in peer-editing groups. After elementary school, the teacher should be seeing for grading only the polished work of a student, or more informal work, which does not require editing for finished form. Other techniques which will assist the teacher to handle the paper load are discussed earlier in this paper (page 65).
CHAPTER IV.

Specific Strategies for Social Studies

Writing to learn in social studies can be a combination of creativity and 'showing what you know'. These activities which follow not only engage the student but make it interesting for fellow students to serve as the audience and critique the work. Junior high students especially are often more pleased to write for their peers than for a teacher. Control over the audience, or changing the audience, also adds a new dimension to an assignment, giving the instructor more latitude. Writing a letter to a contemporary or someone of another age group is a different task than writing a letter for an historical figure, for example.

Ideas for Writing

- The following are general, rather broad ideas easily adapted to any social studies field. Most require research by the student, and all require synthesis of material that has been discovered or presented. Most can be quickly graded through read-alouds (oral presentation), a read-around, or through group discussion of individual papers. The final section of the paper will present more specific writing tasks or lessons which can be
modified to fit most areas of history. Write an imaginary conversation between yourself and an historical figure or between historical figures.

- Imagine you are a person living in the past and keeping a diary, a journal, or writing letters to others of your era.
- Write a quick-write on what you already know or think you know about the person or event we are about to cover.
- Write letters to an historical figure evaluating what he or she accomplished.
- Write a 'what if' essay speculating on what may have happened if an event had never occurred or had turned out differently.
- Imagine you are a traveler or sailor from the past. Keep a log or a diary of your travels. What will others from your era want to know?
- Write an internal dialog or memoir of a person from the past as though you are that person.
- Write a biographical sketch of an individual from history that you find interesting or unique.
- Assume the persona of an individual from history, then describe a specific event in which you were involved.
- Keep a dialectical (two-sided) journal. Write
important historical quotes in one column. Respond to these quotes with your own thoughts in the other.

• As a specific historical figure, describe in vivid and significant detail an important event. Be sure to discuss or evaluate why the event may affect history.

• Write descriptions, letters, magazine or newspaper articles explaining how certain activities were done in the past. (examples: taking a bath in America 300 years ago or 100 years ago; cooking in a castle in Middle Ages France or on the American prairie in 1870.)

Create a website around a particular issue, person, or event you have studied.

SPECIFIC ASSIGNMENTS

For a first-time teacher who has only used fill-in-the-blanks exercises in order to streamline grading, the cartoon strip ‘pre-composition’ may be a logical beginning. In this strategy the student is asked to draw an eight panel cartoon strip of an event to be explained to the teacher. For example, have the student demonstrate, in cartoon or animated fashion, how the book, The Travels of Marco Polo led to the discovery of the New World.

The first lesson the student will learn is how to organize and pace a narrative. Explain that the first and last panels will show the beginning and end of the tale.
Suggest that the student draw a scene from the middle of the explanation in panel four or five. Otherwise, in 'telling' the story, the student may use too many panels in irrelevant details, arriving at panel six with much of the story yet untold. Suggest that some dialog or simple labeling of characters or items may make the story more clear to the reader, but that the bulk of the tale is to be illustrated.

Using this technique as an introduction to composition accomplishes a number of things: The teacher can 'grade' this item very quickly, as it will take less than fifteen seconds per paper to determine whether or not the student has made the desired connections. No complaint here about giving up valuable time. And with enough thought, the students can show fairly sophisticated reasoning or cause and affect relationships. The teacher can get a short snapshot into the reasoning of the student and whether or not the lesson has been 'taught.'

This is a low-frustration level assignment for students and teachers who may be new to composition. No pressure about syntax or grammar here, either; only the material and how it has been organized and presented.

The cartoon pre-essay assignment is especially suggested for students as low as early production level in English proficiency, as this medium allows them to 'demonstrate understanding of key concepts (Pietzman 118)'.

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This strategy can be very useful for ELL (English Language Learner) students and is indeed also a SADAI technique of allowing students an alternate means of expression. As second language learners become more adept at using language, they will rely less and less on pictures, and more on increasingly sophisticated levels of composition.

Students are familiar with letter writing, and this can be used as another method of introducing expository writing into the classroom. Both voice and audience are easily demonstrated in the medium of a letter. This strategy allows the instructor to change and manipulate both so that the student can show a wide range of perspectives.

'This activity requires the student to delve into the personality’ of the character or historical figure, and ‘in essence to become that person (Pietzman 80).’ Walking in the historical moccasins of another not only engages the learner, it also creates an emotional bond, introducing affective learning into the equation. Instead of thinking about a person, students practice thinking as the person.

The following lesson uses both primary and secondary material for the students to read and interpret before they make simple summaries. It is taken from a lesson by Adria Klein that teaches paraphrasing and summary writing.
Students begin by reading short articles which revolve around the topic. Next they discuss the material in small groups, and finally, given three choices, write one article together.

Reading-Interpreting-Writing-Drawing-Lesson

The purpose of this lesson is to practice paraphrase, summary, synthesis of several articles, and working as a group. Each student is responsible for reading and explaining to the group one article relating to the topic. After each student has paraphrased their own article and written a short summary, the group is to write, and illustrate, a short piece developing one important concept. The article must include, at least in part, aspects of all the articles and historical figures represented in the group. Both the article and the illustration should show some relationship among the various people or subjects portrayed in the individual articles. Students may produce a piece that reads like a history text, a newspaper from the day, or a journal, as demonstrated by the Marco Polo piece.

Materials

Readings about the Mongol/Khan period, one printed copy per student, three to four students per group.

Suggestions: Biographical sketches of: Marco Polo, Genghis Khan, Kublai Khan, Travels of Marco Polo, Mongol Empire. Sections from Travels of Marco Polo.
Text representation is an especially creative technique to use with primary source material as well as a culminating exercise after using several sources of information. It simply means retelling the story from another perspective, perhaps even the student’s own. It goes beyond simple summary because it mimics a specific type of work or a literary genre. Poetry is one simple way to introduce this technique.

Begin with a simple poem form, such as ‘Brown Bear, Brown Bear’ by Bill Martin, Jr. The form is:

'____, ____ , what do you see? I see a ____ looking at me.'

Because the rhyme is within the form, there is no question of whether or not to use rhyme or struggle with what for some students is a difficulty finding rhyming words.

Using this pattern, or form, a student may create a poem about the Civil War such as the following example:

Abe Lincoln, Abe Lincoln, what do you see?
I see unhappy slaves looking at me.

Unhappy slaves, unhappy slaves, what do you see?
I see Northern soldiers fighting to rescue me.

Northern soldiers, Northern soldiers, what do you see?
I see my Southern brothers shooting at me (Feather 116).

Because a poem is a short piece in which every word is concise, students are pressed to economize on words, thus placing emphasis on compacting ideas. Poetry concentrates what students have to show as they select the most
significant words and passages. This is just one form of poem that lends itself easily to text representation. After trying their hand at several other forms (haiku, pattern poems) your students may want to try the same idea with songs.

Read-Around: a ‘Publishing’ technique

The Read-Around, a technique borrowed from the creative writing class, allows students to read several students’ papers in one session and also compare their own work to what they see from others in the class. It also encourages important and specific dialog between students about their work (“This messy writing is difficult to read.” or “You really capture our interest with that first sentence.”) Finally, it allows a kind of ‘publishing’ to occur where students select the best one or two from each group to have read aloud to the class.

Begin by assigning a one to two page writing task, such as a letter home from a soldier after the Battle of Gettysburg. This gives the student the freedom to select on which side the soldier fought, where he was during the battle, whether or not he was injured, and to whom he would write. But since all students are writing about a specific day and place, they can easily find and acknowledge or correct definite facts and knowledge about that famous battle.
It will take about one class period to conduct the read-around. Instead of putting their name on the paper, have each student write the last four digits of their phone number, or any four digits. Collect and randomly redistribute the papers. Divide the class into circle groups of five or six students, selecting a group leader. All papers go to the leader until the teacher gives directions.

At a signal, papers are distributed around the circle, and students are instructed to begin reading the paper in front of them silently. At the end of about one minute the teacher says: 'Stop reading. Pass each paper one position to your left. Begin reading the paper in front of you.' Most students will not have finished reading their assigned paper, but they will have read enough to make a judgement call. This rushed atmosphere also speeds further reading.

After another minute, repeat the same directions. You may want to quickly tell the class that you realize not all papers are being finished, but that they have read enough, and to keep up with what you have asked them to do. Do this as many times as it takes to have each paper read by everyone in the circle, five or six times.

Next, explain that they are to decide, as a group, which one or two papers they feel are the best. The leader then writes down the numbers of that paper or papers.
Your next instruction is: 'Pass all papers to the group leader. Each group leader is to pass the packet of papers to the group on your left, so that all papers move in a counter-clockwise direction around the room.' This may take a few minutes the first time, but after that the transfer will go smoothly and quickly. The teacher begins the process again: 'Leaders, distribute the papers. Read the paper in front of you.'

If time permits it is often possible for each student to read each paper. This method will work, however, as long as at least half of the papers are read by each group of students. At this point it is simply a matter of tabulating phone numbers. Have the team leaders call out the top numbers and write them on the board. The second and all subsequent times a number is called, place a checkmark by it. Every time a number is called and written, a student is intrinsically rewarded. But the top award goes to the few papers, one to three, that receive the most check marks. Those papers are read aloud, either by the teacher or a team leader, along with the names of the students who comes to claim the papers with the top praises. All papers are then redistributed.

This read around may be all you want to happen with this assignment, or you may want students who have now seen what others can do, to rewrite their work and present the next copy to a peer editing section with their group.
Regardless of what you do next, all students have had their work 'published' to one degree or another, from letting many others read it, through having their number on the board, and for the top papers, having to 'claim' their paper publicly after it has been selected, anonymously, as one of the best. A side benefit of this activity is that students can readily judge where their own work fits in relationship to others in the group. They do not need 'the grade' from the teacher to tell them where they stand in their writing ability and their construction and organization of ideas.
CHAPTER V.

Conclusion

The present state of educational reform in this country has produced a sort of chaos with individual schools, districts, and entire states in a period of flux. The way we teach literacy is being challenged from all sides. Some areas, as in the Peachtree Project of Georgia and the School Improvement Project in Maryland, seem to have gotten a handle on their goals and initiated specific programs. In doing so they have first gone to the research, placed that research alongside their curriculum, and finally made this learning and brain research available to their teachers. It has been a united effort involving the districts or departments of education within a state, the local colleges and universities, and the area Writing Projects. This three-pronged approach begins with the research from the colleges, couples this research through the Writing Projects which train teachers to train other teachers, and finally takes these trained teachers back to work inside their own districts. These districts, recognizing how this deliberate working together enhances their entire program, very much encourage both the Writing Projects themselves and specific, individual teacher research.

Today's teachers are expected to practice research-based decision-making (Campbell). Nancy Atwell, middle school
education expert and author of *In the Middle*, used her own experiences in the classroom to construct new methods and keep scrupulous records of the data she was able to collect. Professionals in most fields are expected to stay abreast of current research and to apply that research in their work. As teachers we are also open to practitioner research, both our own and that of colleagues. Thirdly, we try to stay current concerning new methods of assessment. All three give us opportunities to generate data and use that data to make decisions about students and about methods of presenting the curriculum. In so doing, teachers become more expert at their craft, students benefit from current research and methodology, and American education, society, and literacy are the benefactors. On the other hand, if they do not, they can not expect improvement. Someone once said that a good definition of insanity is doing the same thing one has always done, while expecting different results. Only deliberate, research-driven changes in teaching can be expected to make the improvements in teaching literacy which are being sought by everyone involved, from parents to legislators. In this result-oriented society we can be certain that if government education does not reform or convince the public that it is still worthy of trust and support, we can fully expect the parents to turn to the private sector to educate the next generation. But it does not have to be that way.
A popular phrase of the last decade was to 'think outside of the box.' This means we can go wherever our research and our common sense dictates if we are willing to take the risks involved in thinking differently from the way we have thought before. As teachers, administrators, professors of new teachers, and writers of every sort in education, it is time to enhance our efforts to teach students to 'learn to write' by teaching them to 'write to learn.'


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