

## Writing, Not Just in English Class

*Writing gives students an opportunity to clarify their thoughts and gives teachers a means to assess learning.*

**By Douglas Fisher and Nancy Frey**

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### Watch the Video!

Watch a teacher help students understand a complex concept by writing.

[www.nassp.org/pl0312fisher](http://www.nassp.org/pl0312fisher)

One of our favorite student quotes is, “I didn’t know what I thought until I wrote it down.” It’s a favorite because it is so true. Writing helps the writer clarify his or her thinking. Writing is thinking. And that’s what teachers want to see more of in their classrooms: thinking. To do more thinking in the classroom, students need to do more writing. We don’t mean copying, but rather composing.

Putting pen or pencil to paper—or fingers to keyboard—is something we expect to see daily in every classroom. Unfortunately, there is evidence that students don’t do a lot of writing at school. In one study of instructional time, students spent 48% of the time listening and only 2% of the time writing (Fisher, 2009). In fact, students in that study spent more time waiting for something to happen (17% of the instructional minutes) than writing. If there is any question about how to fit writing into the classroom, it seems reasonable to suggest that composing replace waiting.

One of the reasons that content-area teachers say that they do not assign more writing relates to their concerns about the revision process. It’s important to understand that teachers do not have to comment on all of the writing that their students do and teachers certainly do not need to ask students to rewrite all of their drafts. There is a time and place for process writing, in which students learn to become better writers. But there is also a time and place for students to write about the content to develop expertise in the thinking styles of the specific discipline.

As Shanahan, Shanahan, and Misischia (2011) note, different disciplines have different traditions

and approaches to reading and writing. Students need experiences with these traditions if they are to develop expertise. In other words, they need to learn to write like historians, art critics, mathematics, coaches, scientists, and literary thinkers.

In addition, students’ writing is an excellent source of data for teachers to consider when reflecting on their teaching and when planning subsequent lessons. When the majority of students in a class cannot summarize meiosis and its relationship to Mendel’s law of genetics, the teacher knows that he or she must provide additional instruction if students are to master this concept. Similarly, when students can explain the differences in various rock formations, the teacher knows that his or her students are ready for additional learning experiences and that they can use their prior knowledge to solve problems.

Instructional leaders should help teachers understand the role that writing plays in fostering students’ thinking and in helping teachers assess student thinking and plan subsequent lessons. Teachers can use writing to facilitate students’ understanding and to check for understanding in numerous ways.

In the video that accompanies this column, health educator Annaleah Enriquez helps students understand the stages of coping with death and dying. The students have learned about Kübler-Ross’s stages of grief and they have written about their perspectives. They have read about each stage and incorporated information into their written notes. They have also analyzed diary entries to determine the state of grief each writer was in and justified their answers in writing using various text sources.

## Perspective Writing

Many students write to an audience of their teachers, thereby missing the point of some writing tasks by failing to develop perspective and purpose in their writing. Santa and Havens (1995) developed a writing prompt to teach students to consider perspective in their writing. The RAFT prompt requires that students understand the role, audience, format, and topic for each piece of writing. For example, as part of a lesson on sportsmanship, physical educator Matt Thompson asked his students to respond to the following prompt:

- R Bronze medal winner
- A Gold medal winner
- F Greeting card
- T Congratulations on your victory

Mr. Thompson knew that his students understood the lesson as he read paper after paper with complimentary notes and appropriate language. For example, Amber wrote:

Dear Winner,  
I was so proud to be by your side when you crossed the line. You pushed me to be a better runner. Thank you for your encouragement. Of course I would have liked to win, but we had a fair race and we all did our best. Enjoy the title because you deserve it. I hope to see you again at the next race.  
Until Next Time,  
Amber

English teacher Marla Ramirez was not as satisfied with her students' understanding. Her class was reading Kafka's *The Metamorphosis*, and she had invited students to respond to

the following prompt:

- R Gregor
- A Mom and Dad
- F Note
- T Why don't you notice me?

Student after student focused on Gregor's literal struggle rather than his struggle for identity. For example, Manuel wrote:

My loving parents,  
I am trying to turn over but I can't. I need your help. Please help me so that I can figure out how to live this way. I think that it is terrible that I am now a bug, but I am still your child. I need help to do things, so you should help me like when I was a kid.  
Gregor

The students' writing reflected their literal understanding of the text, but not its metaphors, so Ms. Ramirez understood that she needed to review some of the initial section of the book, as well as Kafka's purpose as a writer, to help her students understand the existential message.

## Writing-to-Learn Prompts

A number of other types of prompts can guide student thinking and allow teachers to check for understanding (Fisher & Frey, 2012). Some examples include:

- Admit slips: Upon entering the classroom, students respond to an assigned topic, such as "Who was Napoleon and why should we care?" "Describe the digestive process," and "Why are irrational numbers important in science and engineering?"



Figure 1

**This found poem is from a physical science class that focused on states of matter.**

Water  
Changes  
Liquid, Steam, Ice  
Liquid, Gas, Solid  
Temperature changes water  
Freezing, Melting  
Solid, Liquid  
Condensation, Vaporization  
Liquid, Gas  
Deposition, Sublimation  
Solid, Gas  
Water  
Changes



*Every teacher can have students writing—and thus thinking—in class.*

- **Crystal ball:** Students describe what they think class will be about, what might happen next in the novel they’re reading, or the next step in a science lab. For example, while reading a novel, the English teacher pauses and invites students to predict what the character will do next.
- **Found poems:** Students reread a piece of text, either something they have written or something published, and find key phrases. They arrange these into a free-verse poem structure without adding any new words. (See figure 1.)
- **Awards:** Students recommend someone or something for an award that the teacher has created, such as “Most interesting character” or “Most dangerous chemical.”
- **Yesterday’s news:** Students summarize the information that was presented in a film, lecture, discussion, or reading during the previous class. For example, stu-

dents watch a video clip about the plague during class on Tuesday and respond to it on Wednesday.

- **Take a stand:** Students discuss their opinions about a controversial topic, prompted by such questions as “What’s worth fighting for?” in a world history class or “What is ‘normal,’ anyway?” in a psychology class.
- **Letters:** Students write letters to elected officials, family members, friends, or people who have made a difference. For example, students may respond to the prompt, “Write to Susan B. Anthony about the progress that has or has not been made related to individual rights.”

**Invitation to Write**

When asked to write in class, students will likely ask, “Does spelling [or grammar or punctuation] count?” The thoughtful response to this question is, “Write as well as you can right now.” Such a response communicates an ex-

pectation that students will write well, but not necessarily that the teacher is going to read the writing exclusively for mechanics and require that the student revise on the basis of teacher feedback. After all, teachers should not be able to grade all of the writing students do. If they can, they aren’t inviting students to write enough.

Every teacher can have students writing—and thus thinking—in class. Instructional leaders must encourage teachers to use writing more frequently in the classroom. They must also provide support for incorporating writing into classrooms and build writing experiences into staff development and coaching sessions. Writing is thinking—and the goal of educators is to get a lot of thinking done every day. **PL**

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