The Writing Journey

*Kelly Gallagher*

**A California school district provides a case study in how to improve student writing across the curriculum.**

Over the past several years, I have been fortunate to work with an incredible array of teachers from across the United States who have given me valuable insight into their professional challenges. For a while now, I've started each workshop by asking the same question: "How many of you are seeing a decline in your students' writing abilities?" Sadly, no matter where I'm presenting or what the demographic of their students, the teachers' responses overwhelmingly confirm my worst fears: Wide swaths of students are not developing their writing skills—skills we know to be foundational to their literate lives.

Why are writing skills in decline? To answer this question, one might start by reading a recent study of U.S. middle schools conducted by the Education Trust (2015), in which the researchers examined a key question: Do classroom assignments reflect today's higher standards? Their findings were sobering. Only 38 percent of assignments were aligned with a grade-appropriate standard. About 85 percent of assignments asked students to either recall information or apply basic skills and concepts. (The assignments were "largely surface level," the report noted.) Only 1 percent of assignments required students to think for extended periods of time; most assignments could be completed in one class period.

This lack of rigor was especially evident in schools' writing expectations for students in middle school (see fig. 1).

**Figure 1. Writing Expectations for Students in U.S. Middle Schools**

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| **Writing component** | **Percentage of assignments (rounded)** |
| No writing required | 18 |
| Short note-taking | 16 |
| 1–2 sentences | 17 |
| Multiple short responses (For instance, students answer five questions by writing 1–2 sentences per question.) | 27 |
| A single paragraph | 14 |
| Writing longer than a single paragraph | 9 |
| *Source:* Education Trust. (2015, September). *Checking in: Do classroom assignments reflect today's higher standards?* Retrieved from <http://edtrust.org/wp-content/uploads/2014/09/CheckingIn_TheEducationTrust_Sept20152.pdf> | |

Middle and high school teachers do not need elaborate studies to understand that many students come to us with weak writing skills. We read their papers, and we see firsthand what happens when they have had limited writing experience. We remain concerned that young, competent writers are becoming an endangered species, and we know this will only change when decision makers in schools make teaching writing a top priority.

**Reasons to Write**

So how can schools refocus on the importance of writing? One model is found in the Anaheim Union High School District (AUHSD), a grade 7–12 district in southern California serving more than 30,000 students in 16 schools. I teach at Magnolia High School, one of those schools. The district is in its third year of an ongoing effort to raise the volume and quality of student writing across the curriculum—an initiative called the Writing Journey. The early results are promising.

AUHSD's Writing Journey began in fall 2014 when all of the district's 1,300 teachers were brought together to kick off the initiative. Rather than starting with a focus on *how* to get more writing in the classrooms, teachers were asked to consider *why* writing is crucial to students' literacy development. At the kickoff, teachers were reminded of five reasons why students should write more in all content-area classes.

**Reason 1: *When students write, they generate deeper thinking in any content area.***

Students—and some teachers—think that the only reason kids are asked to write in school is to demonstrate what they already know. ("Did you read the chapter? Okay, then answer this question.") But as Langer and Applebee (1987) found years ago, writing is not simply a vehicle that allows students to express what they know; writing is a tool that generates new thinking. The very act of writing leads students to new ideas that they would not have produced had they been simply asked to listen or talk.

Another national study found that when students write, they reach deeper levels of understanding, generate new ideas and thinking, enhance their critical-thinking skills, and are more likely to retain learning in the content area (Graham & Perin, 2007). The research is clear: When students write, they learn more and remember more.

**Reason 2: *Writing helps students become career ready.***

In a report from the National Commission on Writing for America's Families, Schools, and Colleges (2004), Bob Kerrey, chair of the commission, said that writing is both a requirement of high-skill, high-wage, professional work and a gatekeeper skill with clear equity implications. People unable to express themselves clearly in writing will find limited opportunities for professional, salaried employment. Kerrey added that "unless our society pays attention to developing all of the education skills (including writing) of all segments of the population, it runs the risk of consigning many students who are poor, members of minority groups, or learning English to relatively low-skill, low-wage, hourly employment" (p. 19).

This bears repeating: When students' writing skills are limited, doors to opportunity are closed. Students who write well will have a leg up when it comes to finding and keeping a job.

**Reason 3: *Writing helps students become college ready.***

David Conley, author of *College Knowledge: What It Really Takes for Students to Succeed and What We Can Do to Get Them Ready* (2005), examined the gap between the skill levels of graduating high school seniors and the literacy demands awaiting them at the university level. Many students will be shocked to learn that the *A*s and *B*s they earn in high school are not indicative of their readiness to take on university work. Conley suggests a number of ways that schools can better help students make this transition. Of his many suggestions, one of them—found in a landmark, in-depth study of the skills and content students need to succeed in college—stands out: "If we could institute only one change to make students more college ready, it should be to increase the amount and the quality of writing students are expected to produce" (Conley, 2007).

Of all the things schools can do to improve their students' college readiness, the most important move can be summed up simply: Students should be asked to write more, and they should be taught to write better.

**Reason 4: *Writing across the curriculum is now assessed on many state tests.***

As part of their assessment systems, many states have now adopted tests that require students to produce on-demand writing. In many cases, this writing is generated after students have closely read passages culled from various content areas. As such, these state tests are not designed to assess a school's English department; they are designed to assess the entire school. The entire school will do better on these exams if students write regularly in all classes. Schools that put the burden of teaching writing solely on the backs of their English teachers will not adequately prepare students for these exams.

**Reason 5: *We want our students to be lifelong writers.***

This may be the most important reason of all. We want young writers to grow into adult writers. We want our kids to become adults who create thoughtful blogs, write compelling letters to their elected representatives, and post coherent and trustworthy Yelp reviews. We want an intelligent citizenry—an intelligence anchored in lifelong writing.

**Two Key Questions**

After the Anaheim teachers had a deeper understanding of why students should write more, they were asked two questions that would drive a yearlong study of writing in their respective departments:

1. What kind of writing will help students get smarter in your class?
2. When and where should that writing occur?

Over the next several months, teachers met in subject-area teams to wrestle with these questions. The teams generated even more questions: Does a lab report in Teacher A's chemistry class look the same as a lab report in Teacher B's chemistry class—and should it? What does an argument essay look like in a government class? Is there a place in a math class for the narrative essay? What balance should we strike between on-demand writing and process writing? These are tough questions, and the answers were not handed down from the district office. Teachers were asked to use their professional judgment to generate responses to these questions. For instance, at Magnolia High School, world history teachers decided that their sophomores would benefit from a range of specific writing experiences, as shown in Figure 2.

**Figure 2. Writing Experiences for World History Sophomores at Magnolia High School**

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| **Argumentative writing** | **Informational/Explanatory writing** | **Narrative writing** |
| * Arguments spun from answering research-based argumentative questions (DBQs) * Arguments to prepare for Socratic Seminars * Explanations of student-created propaganda posters * Arguments for or against political-cartoon positions | * Arguments spun from answering research-based informative questions (DBQs) * Research papers * Historical biographies * Short-answer writing * Explanations of political cartoons | * Letters, journals, and diaries from the perpective of historical figures * Reading and responding to children's books as a way of building background knowledge about historical events * Character narratives |

Bringing teachers together for these discussions also sent the message that writing is an expectation in *all* classes. Whether or not a student writes should not be contingent on which teacher she has for world history. It is now a departmental expectation that students will write in all teachers' classes. In some departments, units and lessons were modified to build in more time for students to write.

After teachers decided what kinds of writing would benefit their students, they were asked to consider when and where that writing should occur. In the second half of the school year, each department at each school created Writing Journey maps for every course. In our English department, for example, teachers agreed to start the year with a narrative unit because we believe the ability to write a story is a skill that students will use when they write in other discourses. From narrative writing, we mapped out a year in which our students would progress into writing arguments, inform-and-explain pieces, and multi-genre papers. This Writing Journey became a department-wide expectation.

Later, teachers met as departments to align their maps vertically. For example, a student might take six years of science in this order: life science (grade 7), physical science (grade 8), earth science (grade 9), chemistry (grade 10), biology (grade 11), and physics (grade 12). Looking at this vertical pathway raised new questions: How should writing assignments progress in these classes? What writing gaps or redundancies are present in these pathways? Are certain kinds of writing better in certain kinds of classes? And most important, what should a student's Writing Journey look like after six years of science instruction?

These discussions were valuable because they required teachers to look beyond their classrooms and consider the bigger picture of students' literacy development. This, in turn, prompted teachers to be more intentional in their teaching. By the end of the first year, Anaheim teachers had decided what to teach and when to teach it.

Next came the hard part.

**The Shift to How**

After all content-area teachers had Writing Journey maps in place, the district's focus shifted to *how*. How do we support teachers in implementing the Writing Journey? How do we move beyond simply assigning writing and toward teaching writing effectively? It's one thing to recognize that students should write more; it's another to figure out how to help teachers teach writing skills.

The district distributed a survey to all teachers asking them to rank their greatest professional development needs in writing. Teachers in one school, for example, indicated that their top need was to motivate reluctant writers, whereas teachers at another school asked for help in handling the paper load. The district used the survey results to offer tailored staff development, both in after-school workshops and during department and PLC time. In many of these meetings, teachers shared and discussed student writing over the course of many months. Writing is not a "one-and-done, flavor-of-the-month" focus. It is continually revisited throughout every school year.

As a result, the instructional culture of the Anaheim Union High School District is beginning to shift. Three years into the Writing Journey, principals and department chairs at every school report significant increases in the quantity and quality of student writing. Some schools have started to explore department-wide or schoolwide end-of-the-year portfolios. Going forward, the district will continually revisit its plans to support teachers so that writing remains in the forefront of every classroom.

This quest raises a final thought: Earlier in this article, I referred to Anaheim's Writing Journey as an initiative, but it's really not. The word *initiative* implies that the project will fade over time. But AUHSD continues to take steps to remind teachers that writing is simply foundational to deeper learning. This is why the district continues to gather all its teachers in one place at the beginning of every year to revisit its commitment to the Writing Journey. In short, the district recognizes that the Writing Journey is not just an initiative; it is good teaching.

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| **EL Online**  For a discussion of building students' mathematics writing skills, see the online article "[Why Should Students Write in Math Class?](http://www.ascd.org/publications/educational-leadership/feb17/vol74/num05/Why-Should-Students-Write-in-Math-Class%C2%A2.aspx)" by Tutita M. Casa, Kyle Evans, Janine M. Firmender, and Madelyn W. Colonnese. |

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