

The State of Writing Instruction in America's Schools: What Existing Data Tell Us

Executive Summary

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How well are students learning to write? Has achievement been improving or declining over the past several decades? How well are the nation's students being prepared to meet the writing demands of the workplace and of higher education? To what extent do existing patterns of student writing in the academic subjects reflect recent recommendations about the teaching of writing, particularly those of the National Commission on Writing (2003)? These are critical questions in this era where student achievement is front and center on the national agenda (e.g., NCLB), but policy decisions are too often made without considering the importance of students' writing proficiency to overall achievement across subject areas. The National Study of Writing Instruction has begun to address such questions through analyses of existing data sets, particularly those from the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP), which include background questions on instructional practices in U.S. middle and high schools.

NAEP was never designed to answer such questions. It originated in 1969 as a way for Congress to receive reports on student performance across subject areas across the nation. Since NAEP was not meant to be a report of particular school or student performance, the focus has been on broad patterns of performance in a given year and also over time across the nation as a whole, including comparisons of performance for groups defined by geographical regions, race/ethnicity, and grade level. Schools are selected based on a stratified random sampling procedure to insure that the results are representative of the nation.

NAEP assessments in all subject areas ask a series of background questions completed by administrators, teachers, and students about key features of the school, classroom curriculum and instruction, home and community background, and teachers' preparation. These data offer an opportunity to examine the kinds of writing experiences and instruction being offered to varying populations of students and to relate these to student performance. However, because these background questions have never been a main focus of the NAEP assessments, the data sets available to analyze are inconsistent in the questions included and even in the years in which data were collected: They yield a mosaic rather than a tightly designed portrayal of instruction and achievement over time and across grade levels.

Long-term trend data for both writing and reading show a remarkable stability in levels of achievement over time. Despite small ups and downs, by and large, student writing proficiency has kept steady. Gaps between more-advantaged and less-advantaged students also continue, even with a slight upturn in writing achievement between 1998 and 2002 at Grades 4 and 8.

Data over time also suggest that there has been some increase in emphasis on writing and the teaching of writing, both in English language arts classrooms and across the curriculum, although this may have begun to decline from its high. Further, while process-oriented writing instruction has dominated teachers' reports at least since 1992,

what teachers mean by this and how it is implemented in their classrooms remains unclear. The consistent emphasis that emerges in teachers' reports may mask considerable variation in actual patterns of instruction (see Langer & Applebee, 1987).

What is clear is that even with some increases over time, many students are not writing a great deal for any of their academic subjects, including English, and most are not writing at any length. Two-thirds of students in Grade 8, for example, are expected to spend an hour or less on writing for homework each week, and 40% of twelfth graders report never or hardly ever being asked to write a paper of 3 pages or more. Although short, focused writing is also important, such more extended writing is necessary to explore ideas or develop arguments in depth. Further, there are strong patterns of differential instruction based on teachers' notions of what higher- and lower- performing students can be expected to do.

The NAEP data also highlight some external forces that are impacting the teaching of writing, in particular the spread of state standards and accompanying high stakes tests. In some cases, these may be shifting attention away from a broad program of writing instruction toward a much narrower focus on how best to answer particular types of test questions.

Advances in technology have made word processing tools and Internet resources widely available, and students report making extensive use of them in their writing. At the same time, new genres and forms of publication have emerged that integrate a variety of media and capitalize on the flexibility of hypertext. From instant messages to web pages to blogs to embedded graphics and videos, these changes are certainly having an impact on students' writing experiences, though they do not yet appear in NAEP background questions.

Education has been high on the nation's agenda since at least the mid 1990s with the national standards movement, followed by NCLB. But where has this taken us? On the front page of the March 26th *New York Times* (Dillon, 2006) was an article headlined, "Schools Cutting Back to Teach Reading and Math." Writing was not mentioned. Despite national concern for overall student achievement, writing may be in danger of dropping from attention. The analyses of NAEP data reported here suggest that this may already be the case.

Overall, this study leaves us with some disturbing findings about how little time many students are spending on writing, but it also leaves us with more questions than answers. Key questions still to be addressed include:

- How are students helped to understand the social and disciplinary demands of the different forms of writing they encounter? This includes questions about the audiences and purposes for the tasks in which students engage across grades and subject areas, as well as questions about the instruction that accompanies these tasks.

- What has been the effect of the rapid spread of new technologies on students' writing and writing processes? This includes questions about the use of commonly available tools such as word processors and the Internet, as well as questions about evolving definitions of "text" as new genres and forms of publication emerge that integrate a variety of media and make use of new technology platforms.
- To what extent have new technologies, genres, and platforms that play significant roles in society and the workplace been integrated into instruction across grades and subject areas? This includes questions about differential expectations and patterns of instruction that may be related to socioeconomic status, gender, or race/ethnicity, as well as questions about the influence of state and district policies on what and how students learn.

A large-scale study of schools across the country is needed to answer these questions and lay out a national agenda for writing instruction, one that ensures that all students are being prepared to write well. This is critical not only to their success in school, but also for their later success in higher education and the workplace.