

# Writing to Learn, Learning to Write

## Chapter Five

I. “Informal” Writing: Specific Strategies for Writing to Learn

II. Writing Products Across Content Areas

III. “Formal” Writing: The Five-Step Process

### Introduction

Although we have artificially separated reading and writing instruction to clearly explain them both, we must start this chapter by reiterating that reading and writing are inextricably intertwined skills and processes. In fact, both serve as primary means of building comprehension in a secondary classroom, as reading *provides information* and writing *deepens understanding of that information*. For that reason, regardless of the subject matter you teach, the skills of reading and writing are each most effectively taught in connection with the other. Reading and writing are also conceptually hard to separate, as many of the pre-, during-, and post-reading strategies described in the previous chapter to build students’ comprehension also involve writing: recording what students know and want to know in a KWL chart, synthesizing a “gist” statement, noting the Very Important Points of a passage. Indeed, writing in the content-area classroom—in response to what students have read in a text, heard in a lecture, or seen in a demonstration—provides students with a way to process their understanding and apply higher order thinking skills to your content. Students make the greatest academic gains when teachers deliberately harness the synergy of the reading/writing partnership. As literacy researcher Marilyn Jager Adams notes, “Children’s achievements in reading and writing are quite strongly and positively related... an emphasis on writing activities results in gains in reading achievement.”<sup>102</sup>

### Chapter Overview: “Informal” vs. “Formal” Writing

We can roughly divide the writing that happens in your content area classroom into two categories. On the one hand, there is “informal” writing: the shorter, quicker written assignments that you use everyday (if not many times a day) both to spur students’ comprehension about your subject matter and to evaluate that comprehension. For example, you might require students to write in their journal for four minutes on their favorite characteristic of Tom Sawyer in order to connect yesterday’s language arts lesson on defining characterization to today’s lesson on applying it. Or, you might have all the students in your seventh grade earth science class write a dialogue between two water molecules as they travel through the water cycle, so students can demonstrate their comprehension of the process. Informal writing, sometimes labeled “writing to learn,” tends to involve fairly compact and quick methods of expressing ideas and demonstrating knowledge. Teachers evaluate informal writing primarily for its content, rather than its form or style.

On the other hand, there is “formal” writing, which focuses students’ long-term energy on going through the drafting and revision process necessary for creating a well-developed written product. You might, for instance, assign an eighth grade history student to write a biography of Cesar Chavez, in which case you would need to model, teach, and guide the student through researching, note-taking, organizing, drafting, editing, and formatting strategies until a final product is “published” to the class or other audiences. Or, as another example, you might ask your high school chemistry students to complete a structured lab report that lays out the project’s hypothesis, procedures, data, and conclusions.

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<sup>102</sup> Adams, Marilyn Jager. *Beginning to Read: Thinking and Learning About Print*. Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 1994, p. 375.

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*To get my students writing, I have students write their own word problems that use the math vocabulary (and skills) we are currently learning. Students must include a written explanation of how to solve the problem, the answer, and a corresponding picture. This is a great way for me to assess their understanding and involve them in informal writing activities that deepen their understanding.*

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We know you may be thinking, “Isn’t this the English teacher’s job?” Both forms of writing are invaluable tools for secondary teachers of all content areas. You will want to integrate informal writing into the vast majority of your lessons to both monitor and build students’ active thinking about your subject matter. You will also want to implement carefully chosen, long-range writing projects through which you lead students in learning to write for a particular audience in a particular format, as that is what true scientists, historians, and writers do. The frequency with which students complete formal writing projects will vary depending on your subject matter, with students in a secondary English/Language Arts class doing so more than students in a science, social studies, or math class. In this chapter, we will first address the highly

useful “informal writing” structures that teachers use every day to accelerate student learning. Then, we will point out some of the specific writing products that might come out of different classes and turn to the formal writing process.

### I. “Informal” Writing: Specific Strategies for Writing to Learn

First, we will survey a series of popular and effective strategies for “writing to learn,” the writing activities that sustain and extend student engagement with content after the introduction of new material (which could entail reading, listening to a lecture, participating in a group activity, watching a demonstration, or any number of other methods). Implementation of these writing strategies will also allow you to monitor students’ thinking about a topic. Just as we broke down comprehension strategies by phase of the reading/time continuum in which they were most applicable, here we’ll discuss writing activities that are best integrated either during or after learning.

#### Writing to Learn...During Learning

Writing to learn involves much more than just writing down passages from a text or copying what the teacher is writing on the board or overhead during a lecture. Just as we must encourage active thinking while reading, we must help students actively process what they are learning through their writing. The “writing to learn” strategies below are examples of some of the many ways you can help students truly engage in what they are learning by putting pencil to paper and asking questions, summarizing information, visualizing, and in other ways continuing to build and apply comprehension skills.

*In my eighth grade history class, students spend the first five minutes writing thoughtfully in response to a prompt on the front board. We discuss the question as a class, and then move on to the reading. Once students finish their class assignment, they spend the last five minutes of class answering a higher-level question on the content they just learned in their journals.*

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**1. Daily Journals.** Student journals are a fantastic forum for writing that can be implemented with any subject matter. While there are many different forms of journals, in content area classrooms most teachers use content-focused journals. That is, rather than using the journals purely for teaching writing skills or for self-reflection (as a secondary English teacher might), a secondary science, history, math, or foreign language teacher might periodically designate five or ten minutes of writing time at the beginning of a class to have students answer a question about yesterday’s lesson, as a bridge to today’s lesson.

This regular writing activity could be integrated into the “Do Now,” a beginning-of-the-period routine discussed in *Instructional Planning & Delivery*. Or, perhaps the writing prompt is used to engage students during the lesson opening. For example, a physics teacher might have a word problem on the board each day that relates to the day’s lesson, and students must solve the problem in their journal and write an explanation of the methods they chose. A middle school math teacher might post the prompt, “First, calculate the area of the following shapes. Then, describe the differences in size. Use the terms ‘less than,’ ‘greater than,’ and ‘equal to’ in your sentences.” A science teacher might ask students to write out the steps for making a peanut butter and jelly sandwich prior to a lesson on the characteristics of a materials list and procedure section in a lab report.

In order to yield thorough journal entries, you will want to introduce this procedure with clear examples you’ve created. To make your expectations even clearer, provide students with a simple rubric for their entries. If you “phase in” a different aspect of your journal rubric every day, students will have a chance to practice and master each guideline, provided you take the time to show your class what meets, exceeds, and falls below your standards.

To maximize the instructional potential of journals, teachers should provide regular feedback to students on their journal writing, as one additional purpose of such writing is to provide a direct line of communication between the teacher and each student. When a teacher reads through and comments on the writing done in journals, the journal becomes an excellent formative assessment tool. Of course, with 150 students, a secondary teacher might collect only a fifth of the journals each night.

The flexibility of the journal format allows journaling to be used at all grade levels and in all content areas. For examples of daily journal prompts for various content areas, see the **Secondary Literacy Toolkit** (p. 17: “Secondary Daily Journal Prompt Guide”), which can be found online at the Resource Exchange on TFA.Net. ✖

**2. Stop and Jot.** The Stop and Jot strategy allows students—as they are reading a text, listening to a lecture, observing a multi-step demonstration, or watching a video—a chance to evaluate their understanding of the topic, to make a connection to something they have learned previously or experienced outside of school, to make a prediction, and to question anything that they might not fully understand. As the name suggests, the teacher simply stops the students mid-activity and directs them to reflect quickly in writing on what they are reading, seeing, or hearing. Specific prompts are especially helpful to focus students’ responses:

- “We just saw what happened when I released the balloon rocket. Write down why the balloon rocket is a good example of Newton’s Third Law of Motion. Remember to use complete sentences.”
- “Write down two questions you have about the “Matching of Spouses” based on this passage in *The Giver*.”
- “What do you think will happen when I add the blue-tinted canola oil to the other liquids in this graduated cylinder? Draw a picture in your notebook and write an explanation of your prediction.”

The teacher can use these entries to assess students’ comprehension of a particular concept and how actively they are engaging with the material. The teacher might circulate through the room and read over students’ shoulders, or take a minute to have a few students share responses. Or, the teacher can review students’ writing later, especially if the Stop and Jot or other informal writing pieces are captured in a journal (rather than random sheets of paper) as noted above.

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As with all of these strategies, you will need to take the time to show your students what you expect from a Stop and Jot. If you ask your students to write down a question about what they've just heard, some will not know what you are looking for. Before expecting students to "stop and jot" on their own, model this process a few times, and do it as a class. The clearer you are in your directions early on, and the more consistently you reinforce your standards, the more your students will produce what you would like to see.

*My students "Stop and Jot" about their reading every time they read an independent reading book. This provides accountability to the reading as well as reinforces "reading with your brain on," which I teach my students to do. Stop and Jots can be inferences, questions, reflections, or textual connections.*

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**3. Structured Note Taking.** A step more time-intensive than Stop and Jot, Structured Note Taking also helps students actively process the material they are learning. Many teachers find that creating an outline or graphic organizer for students' note taking provides a scaffold of support as students write their thoughts and questions. A few different forms of Structured Note Taking are explained below. You'll notice similarities between the forms:

**Recall Note Taking.** This method of outlining a text requires students to fill out two columns. In the right hand-column, the students jot notes that summarize what they are learning. The teacher can provide these key points if that support is necessary, or the student can evaluate the material on his or her own (obviously, helping students move toward the latter is important in secondary classrooms). In the left-hand column, students must write recall clues or questions that will evoke the information on the right side of the page. For example, during a lecture on the Cuban Missile Crisis, students might note on the right of their form the key points "1) 1962 - Soviet Union behind US in arms race: US had long range missiles, Soviet missiles could reach Europe but not US. 2) After Bay of Pigs, Castro afraid of second US attack on Cuba." and on the left students might pose the question, "Why did Castro and Khrushchev both desire intermediate-range missiles in Cuba?" This process engages students cognitively in the material, as they are essentially creating a "test" for the knowledge that they are learning as they learn it. For an example of this technique from a lecture about the Cuban Missile Crisis, see the **Secondary Literacy Toolkit** (p. 18: "Sample Recall Note-Taking"), which can be found online at the Resource Exchange on TFA.Net. ✖

Clues	Key Points

**Cornell Notes.** Cornell Notes provide students another systematic process for taking notes. The page is divided into three sections. On the left, students note main ideas and key concepts (again, these could be provided by the teacher or produced by the students). On the right, students note details and/or questions they have that connect to the entries on the left. At the bottom, students write a summary of the passage. Completing a Cornell Notes template provides students practice in summarization and asking questions. A Cornell Notes Template is included in the **Secondary Literacy Toolkit** (p. 19). ✖

**Multiple Entry Journals.** Similar to Cornell Notes but with more sections, Multiple Entry Journals prompt students to record (1) main concepts and ideas, (2) connections and questions, (3) key vocabulary words and definitions, (4) a summary of the notes, and (5) a picture that will help them remember the key information. Multiple Entry Journals, if used while reading, can integrate the skill of visualization, as students might draw a picture of what they are reading about. During a math lesson on adding fractions with unlike denominators, Multiple Entry

journals provide a handy space (and reminder) for students to draw pictures that show equivalent fractions. For a copy that you can use in your classroom, see the sample Multiple Entry Journal in the **Secondary Literacy Toolkit** (p. 20). ✂

As you can see, structured note taking can take a variety of forms, and there are multiple permutations that have been developed by teachers. Any effective note-taking organizer will prompt students to apply one or more of the key comprehension strategies, serving to remind students that learning is thinking, and writing is one way to express that thinking. As a general rule, note-taking sessions should be short (no longer than 15 minutes for middle school students and no more than 30 for high school students), and you should vary the note taking strategies you expect students to use. The key here is for students to remain mentally active while reading, listening to a lecture, or watching a demonstration, and for students to process that learning by writing.

*Once my 11<sup>th</sup> grade history students settled down to reading, I always felt the urge to interrupt and make sure they were on point. How else was I to gauge whether or not they were reading carefully and extrapolating the necessary information? I decided it wasn't worth interrupting them so I started re-typing the reading passages for my class, complete with questions, and blank lines for them to answer. My questions were "embedded" into the reading. This way, I didn't have to speak over my students to make sure they were on task and reading carefully. I could tell by walking through the classroom, observing the movement of their pencils on the assignment.*

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We conclude this section with a warning label. Some of these strategies may look very familiar to you. As a successful college student, you no doubt developed a set of skills that helped you absorb the information you needed to master. But your competence comes with a catch: you may find yourself assuming that all students already know how to do what you do. All of the techniques we've outlined are incredibly valuable—to reinforce key concepts, expand students' thinking while learning, and allow teachers to check student understanding—but they must be taught. If you do so, you will not only be enriching your students' mastery of the academic content, but you will be providing students with skills that will help them be successful throughout their education.

### **Writing to Learn...After Learning**

The majority of post-reading/learning strategies involve some amount of writing, as purposeful writing activities are an excellent way to summarize, synthesize, and extend learning. The writing to learn strategies below could be applied to any secondary classroom.

**1. Written Conversation (also called "Dialogue Journals" or "Partner Journals").** The Written Conversation activity involves pairs or groups of students responding in writing to what one another has written, and going back and forth for a set period of time. This strategy improves upon the standard class oral discussion because it involves everyone engaging in the material at once, in an interactive manner. This strategy also allows students to "piggyback" off the ideas of their peers and requires them to think beyond standard responses to elaborate on an idea. To kick off this activity, give students a writing prompt such as, "what surprised you about this experiment?", "what reactions do you have to the reasons the United States entered World War II?", or "how would you summarize the key points of this passage?" Each student should write for a short period of time (one to two minutes usually suffices) and then pass his or her paper to a designated partner or group member. Each student should read his or her classmate's response to the prompt, and then respond in writing with a question, an explanation of why they agree or disagree, or additional thoughts. Each time, students should be encouraged to write for the full one to two minutes. This "conversation" can be passed back and forth two or three times, and then students are allowed to talk out loud with their partner or group about what was written for a few minutes. Then, the teacher can conduct a whole class conversation, with everyone already primed to participate. Remember that you will need to ease students into this process

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by scheduling in time to introduce, model, and practice appropriate and effective responses before expecting students to be able to work independently.

**2. Admit/Exit Slips.** Another common “writing to learn” activity, admit/exit slips are brief writing assignments that can be collected as “admission” to class or “permission” to leave class, and are primarily used as quick, written checks for understanding. For example, admit slips, which would be assigned as homework the day before, might require a brief summary of last night’s reading, a few sentences explaining how the reading connects to their life, or a written explanation of how to solve a problem from last night’s homework. As students enter, the teacher would collect admit slips (noting students who don’t turn them in with an “incomplete” or other such notation in their grade book) and review a sampling of them before instruction begins, perhaps while students are completing their warm up or another beginning-of-the-period routine. A quick analysis of student responses might reveal certain points that need to be stressed in that day’s lesson, or shorten the in-class discussion of the homework because student answers show appropriate understanding. As with other informal writing, admit or exit slip writing is typically not graded (unless to count as a homework completion grade) or subjected to scrutiny for appropriate grammar, as it is typically used as a formative assessment.

<p><b>Admit Slip</b></p> <p>Name: _____ Date: _____</p> <p>Period: _____</p> <p>In your own words, explain what is meant by the phrase “manifest destiny.”</p> <hr/> <hr/> <hr/>
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Exit slips are commonly used as one form of checking for understanding at the end of a lesson. Students are asked to write a brief, focused response to a prompt about the day’s lesson before they leave. Since you should use students’ exit slips as a way to assess the success of the lesson and decide what needs to be reviewed before moving on to the next objective, choose your exit slip prompt purposefully. Some sample exit slip prompts are:

- In one sentence, describe *entropy*. Also, give a real life example of *entropy*.
- Solve for x:  $7x + 12 = -2$
- Circle the adverbs in the following sentences...
- Arrange the following key events of Westward Expansion into chronological order. Choose 2 events, and describe how one led to the other.

<p><b>Exit Slip</b></p> <p>Name: _____ Date: _____</p> <p>Period: _____</p> <p>Write a note to your parent or guardian explaining how you know when a shape has a line of symmetry. (Use the back to draw an example.)</p> <hr/> <hr/> <hr/>
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**3. Magnet Summaries.** This strategy encourages students to organize information and vocabulary from what they have been learning. The teacher chooses “magnet” words (words that demonstrate the main idea of the concept, skill, or text). Next, students look back through the passage or their notes and find five to seven words or phrases that connect to the “magnets” (this can be done in pairs, in groups, or by individuals). Students create main idea statements using the magnets and matching words, an exercise that serves to solidify the information they have recently learned. Consider the following example from a history class.<sup>103</sup> The teacher only wrote the words in bold in the center of each box, and students wrote all other information:

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<sup>103</sup> Buehl, Doug. *Classroom Strategies for Interactive Learning, 2nd edition*. Newark, DE: International Reading Association, 2001.



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When talking about longer-term writing products that should undergo the formal writing process discussed in the next section, there is a more difficult balance that must be determined by teachers of subject areas other than English. Yes, students must master content area learning goals; if a biology teacher must ensure that her students can demonstrate mastery of 80% of the learning goals in eleven multi-week units ranging from cellular structure to ecology, there is simply less time to teach and produce formal writing products such as a five-paragraph essay on ethical considerations in the field of contemporary genetics, or a polished letter to a member of the school board on the language used to discuss evolution in the state-wide textbooks.

But recent findings suggest that it will be far more difficult for your students to be successful in your content area if texts common to your discipline remain inaccessible to them. Research shows us that “students who are taught how to write and edit different forms of expository text improve their comprehension of their content textbooks.”<sup>104</sup> By spending some time teaching your students how to use the type of text structures and patterns common to your subject area and to produce pieces in different genres they may encounter, you are investing in your students’ ability to comprehend those same structures and genres when tackling your content. A social studies teacher who effectively instructs his students on the process of writing a research paper will offer explicit, hands-on instruction on the same text structures (title, headings, images, captions) and text patterns (chronological sequence, episode, etc.) that exist in the textbook they are frequently reading.

In addition to increasing student comprehension, a focus on formal writing in your classroom will help students see and learn the ways in which practitioners work with your subject area in the real world. Scientists must communicate with the public in order to make them aware of important findings or health risks. Those who use math to develop recipes, financial transactions, or architectural plans must convey their calculations to an audience as well. Most state standards recognize this important role by embedding at least one learning goal on communication skills in among the other expectations for that content area. By conceiving of your role as teaching students how to articulate the ideas of your discipline to others, you are more likely to see instruction on formal writing as a central part of your job.

Therefore, content area teachers should focus on teaching students to *write* the types of genres and products, and *use* the type of text structures and patterns, that they frequently *read* in their own classroom. This will both capitalize on the synergistic reading-writing-comprehension relationship and help students write like true practitioners in your discipline. Consider the chart below, which lists the common genres and text patterns of various content areas.

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<sup>104</sup> Billmeyer, Rachel and Mary Lee Barton. *Teaching Reading in the Content Areas: If Not Me, Then Who?* 2<sup>nd</sup> edition. Aurora, CO: Mid-continent Research for Education and Learning, 2002, p. 4.

Content Area	Common Genres	Common Text Patterns
English	Narrative, Persuasive, Expository, Poetic, Dramatic	All text patterns
Math	Expository textbook passages, Step-by-step directions, Word problems	Concept/Definition, Chronological Sequence, Comparison/Contrast
Science	Expository textbook passages, Step-by-step directions, Lab/research reports, Newspaper and Magazine articles	Process/Cause-Effect, Concept/Definition, Chronological Sequence, Comparison/Contrast
Social Studies	Expository textbook passages, Biographies, Autobiographies and memoirs, Primary documents, Editorials, Campaign speeches, Interviews	Chronological Sequence, Episode, Comparison/Contrast
Foreign Language	Short stories, Dramas/plays, Biographies, Autobiographies and memoirs, Newspaper and Magazine articles	Description, Concept/Definition
Art and Music	Critiques, biographies, autobiographies and memoirs, newspaper and magazine articles	Description, Concept/Definition

In addition to the common genres and common text patterns in the table above, the options for writing products are incredibly diverse. Many could apply to a variety of different content areas, making it difficult to present them in any manageable categories. We have attempted here, however, to demonstrate this diversity by listing possible writing assignments as narrative, expository, descriptive, and persuasive.

#### Narrative Writing

- Autobiographies
- Biographies
- Short Stories
- Dramas/Plays
- Folktales
- Mysteries
- Myths
- Memoirs
- Fables
- Obituaries
- Puppet shows
- Cartoons/Comic Strips

#### Expository Writing

- Encyclopedia entries
- Announcements
- Brochures
- Definitions
- Directions
- Essays
- Game rules
- Interviews
- Letters
- Magazine articles
- Newscasts
- Reviews
- Critiques
- Children's books
- Pamphlets
- Job applications
- Posters
- Notes
- Contracts
- How-to-speeches
- Reports
- Summaries
- Newspapers

#### Descriptive Writing

- Wanted posters
- Brochures
- Obituaries
- Observational notes
- Real estate notices
- Character sketches
- Resumes
- Lyrics

#### Persuasive Writing

- Editorials
- Advertisements
- Sales pitches
- Campaign speeches
- Essays

Almost any of these various writing products can be used in any content area classroom, *especially if your students are reading texts in these genres*. Do keep in mind an important point: **while you want to engage your students in a variety of writing products, do not misinterpret this suggestion as a call for creativity for creativity's sake**. You shouldn't spend significant amounts of time, for example, writing "resumes" of various elements in the periodic table or a play that captures the interaction between the variables of rate, distance, and time and bringing such products through the time-intensive five-step writing process. This detour could cause you to miss the goal that you must hit as a content area teacher:

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improved comprehension of the types of reading common to your content area, and improved confidence and abilities in writing the various writing products common to your content area.

With that caveat, once the appropriate product has been determined by you or your students, it will be critical to focus on the process itself, expressly teaching students the steps that go into writing this particular piece. The next section will explore the five-step writing process of pre-writing, drafting, revising, editing and publishing.

### III. “Formal” Writing: The Five-Step Process

Effective writing instruction teaches students to use a logical process to create writing products (such as an essay, an autobiography, a poem, a lab report, or a research paper), and then gives them a chance to practice that process by creating a number of good products. While students may not go through the entire writing process every time they write, each writing-related lesson that you develop and implement should involve express discussion of both process and product. In this section, we will approach the formal writing process generally, in a way that would be applicable to an English Literature paper or the methodology, experimental results, and conclusions from a chemistry experiment. No matter what the product, teachers and students should approach the writing process in five steps:

- (1) Pre-Writing**
- (2) Drafting**
- (3) Revising**
- (4) Proofreading and Editing**
- (5) Publishing and Presentation**

As a secondary teacher of English or any other content area, you will need to instruct students not only in strategies for implementing each of these steps, but also in the sequence of these steps themselves. That is, you want your students to associate writing with this complete process and to be able to expressly describe this five-step process. It should be second nature to your students that there is a meaningful pre-writing stage of any writing project, and that there is a crucial revising stage to any writing project. At the same time, your students should have command of a range of strategies for pre-writing and a range of strategies for revising.

#### Pre-Writing

Pre-writing is a particularly important step in writing that is often forgotten by teachers and students. First and foremost, you cannot expect students to start on the road to writing a persuasive essay, a lab report, or a musical critique with any success if they don't know the qualities of, or haven't seen, an exemplary piece of writing in that genre. A critical step in the pre-writing stage is explicit instruction in the genre of writing students will be producing. Just as when you are teaching any other skill, when teaching the skill of writing a particular genre, you would explain the characteristics of the genre, look at several exemplary models to identify those characteristics, and model the creation of a piece in the genre. A social studies teacher who wants students to write a short biography of a president would need to teach students the characteristics of a biographical

*I have a large bulletin board divided into five sections for the five steps of the writing process. In each section I have posted a student's example of each step we've mastered. When students are going through the five-step writing process independently, they post their names on the board in whichever step their piece of writing is at. This gives each student a tangible way of moving through the process and informs me of each student's progress.*

**Shannon Dingle, RGV '03**

piece, including its chronological structure, highlights of major accomplishments, and anecdotal evidence of the subject's personality. A high school physics teacher would need to teach students how to write the components of a lab report, from how to structure a hypothesis to how to compose an appropriate data analysis and conclusion section; this would probably involve several lessons, spread out over multiple days as you teach those steps of the scientific method. Providing this instruction from the beginning is necessary for students to be able to apply the characteristics of the genre as they consider their own piece.

Middle and high school students should think of pre-writing as both a discovery stage, when one collects and organizes ideas content and ideas, and a rehearsal stage, when writers are mentally and on paper experimenting with and practicing the voice and form that will most effectively communicate their ideas. All too often, even our middle and secondary students think that "writing" an essay, poem, or narrative means sitting down and creating something that won't be altered again.

Your students must internalize the idea that they should generate and organize their thoughts extensively before beginning to draft their pieces. For those of us who have written many papers in high school and college, these two processes are probably almost automatic. We all have our favorite methods: some of us draw webs of connecting ideas on paper, whereas others write ideas on note cards and re-arrange the cards to explore relationships among ideas. Share the pre-writing and organizing method that you use with your students, both to give them a strategy to try, and to convey that this is what good thinkers do. Other universal pre-writing strategies to explicitly teach, model, and help students practice include **brainstorming**, **free writing**, and/or **outlining**.

#### **KWL Chart**

A useful tool for the pre-writing stage of an expository piece is a KWL chart. As you know from our previous discussion of this model, "KWL" stands for "know, want to know, learn." Before beginning a research paper, for example, you would ask students what they know about the topic and what they want to know. As they research their topic, they fill in what they learn. Then, students can categorize their "learned" column and translate those groupings into an outline.

**Brainstorming.** As you know, brainstorming is the initial gathering of all ideas related to a given subject. Most brainstorming sessions have an element of simultaneous organization of those ideas, either in lists or by some graphic design. At every turn and in every subject, you should be modeling this sort of mental organization of ideas. Some tips for teaching brainstorming:

- Set a norm of interaction in your classroom during brainstorming that "there are no bad ideas." Students should recognize that this stage of writing is intended to generate all ideas, as they will sift through them later.
- Vary the method of brainstorming you use. You might model web-like graphic organizations of ideas, or provide students with Venn Diagrams in which to brainstorm comparison/contrast ideas. Even older students enjoy using sticky notes for brainstorming and organizing ideas (and that method lends itself to useful display for the class).
- Stress to students that brainstorming is usually the very first step in the pre-writing stage and should occur before outlining begins.

**Free Writing.** Free writing is a useful tool for getting the ball rolling on a given subject. A teacher asks students to write whatever they want on a given section of the outline for a specific amount of time or for a specific length. One fun method is to instruct students that they must not stop writing—their pens must stay moving—for two minutes. Students usually enjoy sharing these pieces out loud, and from them, students might be able to extrapolate interesting ideas to build on and take into the next stage of writing.

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One advantage of the free write is to give reluctant students permission to let their imagination go, without concern for form, spelling or grammatical conventions.

**Outlining.** A key step in ensuring that a piece of writing has both substance and flow is the process of outlining the results of a brainstorm and/or a free write. As you emphasize the outlining component of pre-writing with your students, consider the following tips:

- Introduce students to outlining through very familiar content. Students can outline a daily routine, the rules in a favorite sport, or the plot of a favorite childhood story. The key is to allow students some occasions to think about the outlining process without struggling with content at the same time.
- Show students the importance of ordering ideas within a piece effectively. Have students identify their most compelling example or point and have them experiment with placing it first and then last. Which impacts the reader more?
- Simultaneously teach outlining as a pre-writing, generative exercise and as a note-taking skill. Students will become much better outliners when they are thinking of all texts that they encounter in outline form.

*My kids do a lot of prewriting and drafting in my class, especially at the beginning of the year. They don't take every piece to publication; instead, they choose which pieces they commit to publishing. Jaime told me, "Miss, I like that we get to choose which stories we take all the way to publishing. Sometimes I just want to free write and leave it at that."*

**Shannon Dingle, RGV '03**

Many students and teachers underestimate the time that effective pre-writing takes. As a general rule, the less familiar a student is with the content or form of the writing project, the more pre-writing time is necessary to discover what the students know and do not know about the subject. It is certainly not unusual to spend the same or more time on pre-writing that you spend with students on drafting a written text.

### Drafting

This second stage of writing refers to the time when the student is actually crafting language and translating an outline or organized brainstorm into a more coherent piece. Here, students begin to apply the characteristics of the genre to their writing. You must show students that drafting a piece is *not* writing. Rather, drafting is one step in the writing process. The first draft is usually done swiftly to get ideas on paper. In fact, research indicates that writers who try to make the first draft "perfect" run the risk of missing opportunities to discover ideas that could be surfacing during the drafting process.<sup>105</sup> To help students' keep their momentum going, some teachers will set norms for skipping a sentence or paragraph when students are having a difficult time with language. Some teachers, looking ahead to the revision and editing stages, insist that students skip lines when writing rough drafts by hand.

### Revising

"Revising" refers to substantive changes that are made after the rough draft. As opposed to the "editing and proofreading" stage that focuses on spelling, grammar, or punctuation, revision considers the effectiveness of the communication, both in terms of content and language. Students will also address matters of style during the revising stage. To help students grasp the purposes of this stage, ask students the following questions:

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<sup>105</sup> Botel, M. and Susan Lytle. *Pennsylvania Comprehensive Reading/Communication Arts Plan II*. Harrisburg, PA: Pennsylvania Department of Education - Communications Division, 1998.

- What ideas should you add to this piece of writing to improve it?
- What should you subtract from this piece of writing to improve it?
- What needs to be rearranged within this piece of writing?

As with all steps of the writing process, the teacher should model this stage by working with students to revise an example. She might read her piece to students and ask them the above questions, and perhaps literally “cut and paste” sections of her document—using scissors, tape, and an inserted piece of paper—to open up more space for writing if students suggest elaboration. (If students are writing their work on computers, teaching students the cut and paste function will be necessary.)

Possible foci during the revision stage of writing are the ideas and content of the writing, including the connections among ideas, careful attention to appropriateness for the intended audience, and smooth transitions. Or, students might be asked to read their document for a particular type of revision, such as beefing up the descriptive adjectives in a short story or ensuring that they have provided sufficient supporting evidence for their argument in an editorial. Of course, if a text includes a repeated, glaring mechanical error (such as a consistently misspelled word), a teacher should not hesitate to point out the error during the revision stage and to remind the student to address the problem during the editing phase.

*When we go through the five-step writing process, I take one student’s anonymous example and we revise this together either on the overhead or using my laptop and an LCD projector. I take suggestions from the class on how to change it and all students copy what I write as we go along.*

**Martin Winchester, RGV ‘95**  
**Chief Schools Officer,**  
**IDEA Public Schools**

One common approach in the revising stage involves peer review of students’ writing. Peer review, if deliberately executed, can be an excellent learning experience for both the writer and the reviewer. Ideally, the teacher creates individualized peer review sheets to help students examine a specific piece of writing. Consider the following questions that might help guide a peer review (and notice that none are “yes/no” questions):

- How can I strengthen the beginning of my paper to involve my reader better?
- What details could I add that would help explain what I am trying to say?
- How could my characters be more realistic?
- Which paragraph stands out from the rest?
- How could I better organize my information?
- What research do I still need to do?
- What do you think I am trying to say?
- What would be a more appropriate ending?

Of course, you would need to model and practice peer revision before allowing students to do so independently.

### **Proofreading and Editing**

During the “proofreading and editing” phase, the student-author does the nitty-gritty check on the mechanics of the writing, watching carefully for details such as spelling, grammar, usage, punctuation and capitalization. You must *teach* students both the importance and “know-how” of these editing skills, even in your content area. The reality is that all teachers, including math, science, and social studies teachers, have a responsibility to improve students’ formal writing skills. Students should leave your room not only commanding age-appropriate proofreading and editing skills, but believing that the proofreading stage is an integral part of writing that cannot be skipped—just as a microbiologist would never submit a proposal to *Science* without going through the peer-review and proof reading process.

## Writing to Learn, Learning to Write

Teachers in all content areas and at all grade levels find themselves teaching mini-lessons on capitalization, punctuation, and other writing mechanics, even in the age of spell- and grammar-check, as not all students will have access to computers to write their pieces. If possible, determine what grammatical skills students are mastering in English class, and provide a rubric that outlines the language mechanics expectations for their writing in your class. Some teachers even teach professional proofreading marks, a technique that often motivates students to be more careful proofreaders. (For a table of editing marks that you can use with your students, see “Copyediting and Proofreading Marks” on page 21 in the **Secondary Literacy Toolkit**, which can be found online at the Resource Exchange on TFANet. ✕) Teachers should expect students to invest the time to fix all errors to the best of their ability and demand that they provide a clean, correct copy for their readers.

*I have my students on a writing schedule where they produce a final draft of a 5-paragraph essay every 3 weeks. Each Monday, we do a free-write that is prompted by the national news, a recent holiday, or something going on around school. I have several questions or prompts related to the chosen topic, and I simply ask my students to write and keep their pens moving about anything and everything that comes to mind. On the 3<sup>rd</sup> Tuesday of every cycle, students choose one of their 3 free-writes to turn into a “focused writing.” These essays focus on the specific skills we have been learning in class for those three weeks, and are graded accordingly by using a rubric.*

**Maron Sorenson, Atlanta '04**  
**Teacher/Induction Tutor, London Academy**

### Publishing and Presentation

This stage brings closure to the writing process by allowing students to share their best work with others, whether that sharing takes the form of a book that is sold at local bookstores or an oral presentation about a project to the class. After reading from *Chicken Soup for the Teenage Soul*, students in Martin Winchester’s (Rio Grande Valley '95) seventh grade English class compiled their own personal narratives into a classroom publication entitled *Menudo for the Seventh Grade Soul*. Each student received a copy. Many teachers report that a publication deadline and opportunity for presentation has a significant impact on a students’ motivation to write and also focuses students’ energy on revising and editing.

There are obviously many ways to “publish” students’ writing. To spark your own thoughts, consider the following methods:

- read writing aloud to peers
- submit to a contest
- create a class anthology
- record it on a cassette tape
- post it in the hallway
- perform it as a skit
- submit it to a magazine
- read it at an assembly or over the loudspeaker
- share in a reading party
- mail to far away family members
- produce a videotape of it being read aloud
- send it to a pen pal
- display on bulletin board
- read it aloud to younger students
- submit it to the local newspaper
- submit it to the school yearbook or literary magazine

### In Summary. . .

So, when you assign formal writing projects in your language arts, math, social studies, science, foreign language, or arts class, set a solid foundation for your students by teaching them that writing is a five-step process. Plan the lessons and your students’ work using these five steps as a framework. By way of summary and review, consider the following table setting forth the components of each stage:

Stage	Student Activities
<b>Pre-writing</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Teach students the specific characteristics of the chosen genre through explicit instruction, modeling, and guided practice</li> <li>• Choose a topic</li> <li>• Brainstorm, gather and organize ideas, words, pictures, or images associated with the topic</li> <li>• Use a KWL chart for expository writing or a Quick Write for other types of writing to discover what is known on a particular topic and to discover what direction the writing might take</li> <li>• Use graphic organizers to cluster ideas and details</li> <li>• Use Quick Writes to generate more thoughts on particular ideas in the writing</li> </ul>
<b>Drafting</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Identify the audience to whom students are writing and remind students of the characteristics of the genre</li> <li>• Write a rough draft</li> <li>• Emphasize content rather than mechanics</li> </ul>
<b>Revising</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Share writing in writing groups</li> <li>• Participate constructively in discussions about classmates' writing</li> <li>• Make changes in their compositions to reflect the reactions and comments of both teacher and classmates</li> </ul>
<b>Editing</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Proofread their own compositions</li> <li>• Help proofread classmates' compositions</li> <li>• Increasingly identify and correct their own mechanical errors</li> </ul>
<b>Publishing</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Publish their writing in an appropriate form</li> <li>• Share their finished writing with an appropriate audience</li> </ul>

## Conclusion

You have many options as you consider how to integrate informal and formal writing into your subject area courses. Keep in mind the following lessons as you do so:

- Reading and writing are inextricably intertwined skills. We have generally separated the discussion of reading and writing in this text, but the two should happen hand-in-hand in content area classrooms to optimize student comprehension.
- Secondary teachers of all content areas should regularly incorporate informal “writing to learn” activities into their lessons. “Writing to learn” techniques prompt students to deeply engage with the information they have learned and encourage students to apply various comprehension strategies. These writing activities could happen during or after reading, listening to a lecture, participating in a group activity, watching a demonstration, or engaging in any number of other instructional methods. Implementation of these writing strategies will also allow you to monitor students’ thinking about a topic.
- While there are a variety of more formal writing products that your students could produce, focus primarily on teaching your students to write products that align with the genres you most commonly read in your subject area. This alignment will result in increased comprehension of your content area texts. Avoid formal writing products that are purely creative (unless, of course, you are teaching a creative writing class).
- When embarking on a few carefully chosen formal writing projects in a school year, teach your students the five-step writing process and support them as they move their piece through the various stages.