Strategies to Improve Student Writing

David Smit • Kansas State University

The Crisis in Writing

Of course we want our students to write well. And we know from our own classes, as well as from newspaper articles and television specials, that our students do not write as well as we think they should. The latest report of The National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) — which conducts the most careful test of the writing abilities of students in grades four, eight, and 12 — reports that only 16 percent of eighth-graders can write informatively at the level of "skillful" or better, and that only 26 percent of 12th-graders can write persuasively at that level. However, between 60 percent and 70 percent of both groups can produce writing that the NAEP labels "sufficient" (National Center for Education Statistics, 2007, pp. 30, 44). These results may confirm our worst fears.

Reasons to Question the "Crisis"

However, there are many reasons to think that the "crisis" in writing is more a function of our attitudes and expectations than it is a result of how our students actually write.

For one thing, we need to remember that the NAEP does not use a normed test. Indeed, there are no national norms or standards to help us determine what students at various ages should be able to accomplish in writing, with or without schooling. As a result, we have little basis other than our own expectations for deciding how well our students write.

In addition, writing is extremely complex, so we have no common standard for what we mean when we say that our students do not write well. Depending on circumstances, we may mean 1) that our students' writing is not well thought out, 2) that it is not clearly organized, 3) that it is not well documented or that it needs more detail or evidence, 4) that it needs to be better edited, 5) that it

needs a more appropriate tone, 6) that it needs to be better adapted to the situation for which it was written, or simply 7) that it needs to be "clearer," whatever that may mean.

As a result, we often disagree about what constitutes good writing. In a major study of 300 essays read by 53 readers in six different fields — English, social science, and natural science teachers; editors; lawyers; and business executives — Paul Diederich (1974, p. 6) found that 101 essays "received every grade from 1 to 9 [the entire range possible]; 94 percent received either seven, eight, or nine different grades."

A final reason for thinking that the crisis in writing is a function of our attitudes is that the crisis has remained remarkably stable for over 100 years. Indeed, the crisis began with the rise of mass education at the end of the 19th century. For example, in 1898, the Subject A Examination at the University of California, a precursor of today's writing tests, indicated that 30 percent to 40 percent of those taking the test were not proficient in written English, a number very similar to the number of those who do not do well on today's tests. Yet "in 1890 3.5 percent of all seventeen-year-olds graduated from high school; by 1970 the number was 75.6 percent" (Rose, 1989, p. 6). It seems that the percentage of students "deficient" in English has remained about the same, while we have been educating a much higher percentage of the population at the high school level.

The Most Obvious Reason Why Our Students Do Not Write Well Enough

The reasons for our students' inability to write well enough to meet our expectations are many and varied. Many of us blame television, or the Internet, or the lack of homework in school, or the breakup of the nuclear family. However, the most obvious reason that our students do not write well is that they receive a limited amount of instruction in writing and they do not write very much. Arthur Applebee and Judith Langer (2006, p. 2) report that "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." When students do write, they tend to write a limited range of genres: mostly reports, summaries, or analyses. In English classes, they may write a few stories or poems. They do little persuasive writing at all.

There are few studies of the writing students do in college. In one survey (Thaiss & Porter, 2010), 568 colleges and universities in the United States had some form of writing-across-the-curriculum that required at least one upper-level writing course after the first year, but it is not clear how much students wrote in these courses, the kinds of writing they did, or how they were taught. The National Survey of Student Engagement (NSSE) (2009, p. 34) reports that in its participating institutions, as many as 53 percent of first-year students and 44 percent of seniors write between one and four papers from five to 19 pages each in an academic year. However, the great majority of students write papers of five pages or less. The NSSE report provides no information about the nature of these papers or how students are taught.

My general impression from talking to colleagues in writing studies from around the country is that in most colleges and universities, students write very little, and when they do write, they write short analytic or evaluative reports, for which they receive little instruction. They are simply told to produce a paper that meets a list of requirements by a certain date, and are graded on how well they meet the instructor's expectations.

If we are going to improve the writing of our students, we will need to require our students to write more often so that they can get sufficient practice; we will need to actually teach our students how to write the papers we require of them; and we will need to ensure that they get a range of experience writing a variety of genres so that they can see how complex writing is and how writing varies depending on the context, the genre, and the audience. Perhaps most importantly, we will need to design our writing instruction in ways that will help our students transfer what they have learned in school to the writing they do in the world outside of school.

Writing to Learn

One way that instructors can promote fluency in writing is by requiring students to use what Stephen Tchudi (1986, p. 20) calls *workaday writing*, or writing to learn. There is some evidence that particular kinds of workaday writing may also reinforce certain kinds of learning and help students learn the content of their courses (Langer & Applebee, 1987). Note-taking, for example, may help students focus on the main ideas of the course, and journals and mini-essays may help students reflect on the content of the course and integrate that knowledge into larger conceptual schemes (Smit, 2004, pp. 108-110).

The advantages of incorporating workaday writing into content courses are that:

1. "It is generally short and impromptu, not requiring large amounts of student or class time.
2. It is written primarily for the benefit of the writer as an aide to clarifying experience; thus,
3. It does not require extensive instructor commentary and response (theme correcting)" (Tchudi, 1986, p. 20).

Workaday writing includes the following activities:

Note-taking, which requires students to not only take careful notes, but to reflect critically on what they have heard or read. For example, students might be asked to respond to lectures or reading by answering these kinds of questions:

- What did you already know about this material?
- What is new to you?
- Does anything contradict what you already knew?
- Does anything expand or provide more evidence for what you already knew?
- What don't you understand?
- What support does the speaker or writer give for his or her facts?
- What patterns of reasoning does the speaker or writer offer as evidence?
- Have you encountered reasoning like this before? If so, where? Are these patterns typical of the discipline as a whole?

Journals, which require students to write extensively several times a week, summarizing what they have learned, and raising issues and problems. Teachers may use the same sort of guide questions for journals as they use for note-taking.

Microthemes — mini-essays on five-inch by eight-inch cards — which require students to write summaries, support theses, pose questions, work with data, and provide support for generalizations (Tchudi, 1986, pp. 24-25). Here is a sample microtheme assignment for an introductory physics class (Bean et al., 1982, p. 35):

> Suppose that you are Dr. Science, the question-and-answer person for a popular magazine called *Practical Science*. Readers of your magazine are invited to submit letters to Dr. Science, who answers them in "Dear Abby" style in a special section of the magazine. One day you receive the following letter:
>
> Dear Dr. Science,
> You've got to help me settle this argument I am having with my girlfriend. We were watching a baseball game several weeks ago when this guy hit a pop-up straight up over the catcher's head. When it finally came down, the catcher caught it standing on home plate. Well, my girlfriend told me that when the ball stopped in

midair just before it started back down, its velocity was zero, but acceleration was not zero. I said she was stupid. If something isn't moving at all, how could it have any acceleration? Ever since then she has been making a big deal out of this and won't let me kiss her…. You've got to explain it so we both understand, because my girlfriend is really dogmatic. She said she wouldn't even trust Einstein unless he could explain himself clearly.

Sincerely,
Baseball Blues

Can This Relationship Be Saved? Your task is to write an answer to Baseball Blues. Because space in your magazine is limited, restrict your answer to what can be put on a single 5" X 8" card. Don't confuse Baseball and his girlfriend by using any special physics terms unless you explain clearly what those terms mean. If you think some diagrams would help, include them on a separate sheet.

Workaday writing gives students the opportunity to write in order to clarify for themselves what they are learning and why. It also gives teachers a chance to quickly determine how well the students can use the terms and concepts being taught in their courses. Because workaday writing is short and informal, it does not need to be graded, and teachers can read many responses in relatively little time. And if teachers think it helpful, they can use workaday writing to conduct a dialogue with individual students.

Students may also do workaday writing for each other, either for small study groups or for the class as a whole. Such a pedagogy, called *distributed cognition* (Brown et al., 1993), requires students to share information with each other so that they have access to and learn more than they could on their own or by simply listening to lectures. Writing for study groups or the entire class might include reports, abstracts, and summaries that students could share as study guides for tests. Or students could write letters, interviews, class newsletters, annotated bibliographies, and evaluations that provide the class with information they could not research on their own.

Writing Rhetorically

Workaday writing can be very useful for students while in school. However, when we talk about how well our students write, we generally are not referring to how well they write genres that may help their classroom learning. When we say that we want our students to write well, we usually mean that we want them to write well not just in school, but also on the job and in their lives after they graduate. This means that our instruction must help students to think *rhetorically*; that is, we must teach our students how to adapt their writing in different genres to different audiences and social contexts.

Overwhelmingly, the academic pedagogies that seem to best prepare students to think about these and other aspects of writing are called *structured learning* or *strategy instruction*, both of which involve goal-setting, teaching students specific strategies to help them accomplish some aspect of planning or composing, and organizing a "pleasant, supportive, and collaborative" learning environment (Graham, 2006, p. 188). One specific example of structured learning is what George Hillocks (1986, p. 122) calls *the environmental mode*, which has the following characteristics:

1. Clear and specific objectives. For a laboratory in chemistry, a specific objective might be the accurate reporting of data in a certain format.
2. Materials and problems to engage students with each other in specifiable processes important to writing. To give students practice in reporting data, they might be given sets of data and asked to interpret the data and write up the results in a specified format.
3. Activities with a great deal of peer interaction, in order to give students practice in working on problems cooperatively, and to make the work engaging.

In a massive meta-statistical study of the effectiveness of various strategies for teaching writing, Hillocks (1986) found that the environmental mode and a companion strategy called *focus on inquiry* were by far the most beneficial pedagogies for improving writing. Hillocks' results have been confirmed 20 years later in a similar meta-analysis by Steven Graham (2006, pp. 204-205).

Unfortunately, there is also considerable evidence that the writing students do in school does not necessarily prepare them adequately to write outside of school. Writing on the job or for other rhetorical situations in public life demands that writers confront a host of contextual difficulties they did not face in school when they only had to write a standard "school genre" for the teacher. Outside of school, writers must write new genres with conventions they are not familiar with; they must deal with multiple audiences that are difficult to conceptualize; and they must confront the ways documents circulate among various organizations and constituencies, and the ways members of these groups contribute to the composing of documents (Beaufort, 2006, pp. 229-230).

Whether we can help students transfer their learning from our classes to other contexts is still a matter of debate, but there is some evidence that the following strategies can enhance transfer and efficiency of learning in new social contexts (Beaufort, 2007, pp. 151-152):

1. Teachers can help students "structure specific problems and learnings into more abstract principles that can be applied in new situations."
2. Teachers can provide opportunities for students "to apply abstract concepts in different social contexts."
3. Teachers can promote "the practice of mindfulness, or meta-cognition."

In order to incorporate structured learning and to promote the transfer of learning into our teaching of rhetorical writing, we might consider using the following sequence of steps (adapted from Tchudi, 1986, pp. 30-37):

1. Decide on how teaching a specific set of writing skills can fit into and reinforce the larger objectives for the content course.
2. Decide on a rhetorical situation and an identifiable genre used outside the classroom that will give students practice using these skills. Such rhetorical situations give students a potential audience, real or imagined; a genre, such as a business letter or a report, with a set of conventions that must be modified in each new context; and a role to play so that they can think about matters of style, tone, and evidence when addressing a specific audience.
3. Give students opportunities to reflect on audience, genre, and context during the writing process. Direct their attention to how their style, organization, and evidence should be based on the knowledge and expectations of their audience and the conventions of the chosen genre.
4. Create one or more focused activities that require students to demonstrate the course objectives. Put the requirements for the activity on an evaluation form or checklist so that students can see what they must accomplish.
5. Help students through the writing process as necessary. This might involve something as simple as checking an early plan to make sure that students are on the right track. It might mean devoting a class period to small-group workshops in which students read and respond to each other's work. It might involve individual conferences with students to go over early drafts.
6. Grade, evaluate, or respond to the writing by commenting on what the writer did well and by concentrating on two or three ways that the writer could most improve the paper. Avoid long lists of errors. There is considerable evidence that teacher comments are not effective in and of themselves. To be effective, teacher comments need to reinforce the main focus of the instruction, providing feedback on matters that have been previously taught or skills that have been previously practiced (Hillocks, 1986, pp. 167-168).

Here is how such a pedagogical strategy might work for a course in American history. To begin, the teacher might set as the content objective: The students will be able to list the possible causes of the Revolutionary War and discuss in detail the arguments for and against the various causes. The real-world genres in which this objective is made concrete might be a journal of popular history, a feature story in the Sunday supplement of a newspaper celebrating the Fourth of July, or an editorial in a newspaper celebrating a facet of contemporary life that has resulted from the way the revolution changed the country. Here is a possible assignment for our hypothetical American history teacher:

Choose one possible cause, or series of causes, for the Revolutionary War. For a magazine devoted to making history available to general readers, such as *American Heritage*, explain and provide the evidence to support one major cause of the American Revolution. Clearly document the sources of your evidence, using a form of documentation appropriate to the magazine. Be sure to meet any objections to your evidence. Here is the evaluation form that we will use when we read your paper:

Name: _____ Reader: _____
At the beginning of your article, the claim about a possible cause of the Revolutionary War is clearly stated or implied.
    ____yes ____no ____sort of
Your evidence is clear and convincing.
    ____yes ____no ____sort of
You cite possible objections to your claims and adequately refute them.
    ____yes ____no ____sort of
You use an appropriate form of documentation consistently.
    ____yes ____no ____sort of
Comments:

In order to prepare students to do this assignment, the American history teacher should also give students practice in how to accomplish the major objectives of the assignment. In this case, the teacher might give the class a list of facts and figures about the ownership of property among the delegates at the Constitutional Convention; divide the class into groups of three or four; and ask each group to prepare a brief position paper, arguing for or against the claim that the Revolutionary War was fought in order to protect the property of the landed gentry. The point of such activities is to involve students in thinking about the objectives of the course and to give them practice in using the kinds of evidence and reasoning they will need to use in their writing for the course.

In order to help students through the writing process, the American history teacher might do any combination of the following:

- Have the students brainstorm possible ideas for their papers in class and share their ideas aloud so that the teacher can comment on them and clarify what an acceptable paper might look like.
- Ask students to submit plans for the paper ahead of time so that the teacher can see whether the students are on track and give them some brief suggestions on how to improve their basic ideas and the organization of those ideas.
- Once the students have a first draft, divide the class into groups of three or four, and have each group read and comment on each other's papers using an evaluation form or checklist based on the specific goals of the assignment. Such peer review not only

gives students a number of varied responses to their writing; it also gives them the opportunity to critically analyze the writing of others and practice the kinds of analysis they need to use with their own papers.

- At every stage, have students reflect aloud or in writing about who they are writing to, the conventions of the genre they are writing, and the contextual factors that might influence how their papers could be understood or misunderstood. Also have them discuss how the elements of the writing process might be different in different situations. If they can, teachers might also draw the students' attention to how the rhetorical situation and the genre of the assignment are similar to and different from other writing the students have done. Such meta-cognitive thinking may be the primary skill necessary for the student to transfer what they learn about writing in American history class to writing outside of school.

Lastly, the American history teacher needs to respond to the writing she has assigned by praising what the student has done well, and, if necessary, by requiring that the student revise the paper to make it better. In suggesting how the student should revise, the teacher should use what Cy Knoblauch and Lil Brannon (1984, p. 129) call *facilitative commentary*: 1) she should allow the writer to control the discourse, 2) she should use negotiation and dialogue on the assumption that the writer knows his own purposes better than any reader, and 3) she should play the part of a reader who knows the effect the writer had on her — even better than the writer does. This negotiation should promote a richer meaning of the text.

Instead of saying, "Don't do it your way; do it this way," the teacher should say or imply, "Here's what your choices have caused me to think you're saying — if my response differs from your intent, how can you help me to see what you mean?" Instead of writing in the margin, "You have no evidence for this assertion. Cut it out," the teacher should ask, "On what basis are you making this assertion?" The point is to give students practice in the kinds of thinking that writing requires. If in her comments a teacher simply tells her students what to do, all her students will get is practice in following directions.

The Bottom Line
We have known for some time why our students do not write well. And we have known for some time how to correct the problem. We must give our students many more opportunities to write, using a pedagogy with the following characteristics:

1. Assignments that provide a rhetorical situation for the writing task: a purpose, a genre, an audience, and a discussion of the contextual factors that may produce effective communication in this particular situation.
2. An emphasis on the process of writing: providing instruction in (and sufficient time for) getting ideas, planning, writing drafts, analyzing their drafts, revising, and editing.
3. Opportunities for students to practice the skills necessary to fulfill the major purpose of the writing task.
4. Focused responses to students' drafts that include comments on how well the draft meets the demands of the assignment, and one or two ways to improve other matters, such as organization or editing.
5. Meta-cognitive reflection on the genre conventions, the audience, and the contextual factors of the rhetorical situation, especially ways in which these factors are similar to and different from other writing that students have done.

Just as important, we must recognize that students cannot get sufficient practice in writing if they only write in English classes. Writing needs to be the responsibility of colleges and universities as a whole. But for us to teach writing effectively across the curriculum, we need smaller classes and teachers who are trained to teach writing effectively in academic disciplines outside of English. Thus, the solution to the "crisis" in writing is not only educational. It is also social and political. We must insist in our departments — and in other departments across our colleges and universities — that writing is important enough to be taught throughout the curriculum. And we must constantly remind the public media, funding agencies, college governing boards, and university boards of trustees that we need smaller classes so that, first, we can require our students to write more often and, second, we can give their writing the attention it deserves. With appropriate financial support and curricular reforms, we can indeed begin to deal with the crisis in writing.

David Smit is a professor of English at Kansas State University, where he directed the Expository Writing Program for 10 years and where he now teaches an upper-level writing course for non-English majors and a writing course for secondary-education majors. He has published numerous articles on style, portfolio assessment, and rhetorical theory. In his book The End of Composition Studies *(2004), Smit argues that in colleges and universities, writing should be taught in academic disciplines across the curriculum by people trained to write the genres related to those disciplines.*

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