



# Don't Assign Writing — Teach it!

## SUMMARY

Students learn to write when they are *taught* to write in contrast to being *assigned* to write. When teachers and support staff teach students using specific writing strategies that develop fluency and organizational schema related to subject area content, students become writers.

This article addresses recommendations 1, 2, 3, 4, 7, 8, 9, 10, and 11 of the “Writing Next” report of the Alliance for Excellent Education and the Carnegie Corporation of New York. (See page 98)

## *The Challenge*

Teaching writing to adolescents can be a formidable challenge. Many content-area teachers have not been prepared in their course work to *teach* writing in their discipline. In addition, many adolescent students arrive in high school without having had sufficient instruction in writing about history, mathematics, or science. Much of their writing has been in language arts classes, with hope or expectation that what they learned in an English class can be transferred to their other subjects. Furthermore, many teachers hesitate to even *assign* writing to their students because of their perceived need to correct poorly written text, which in turn causes many students to either make perfunctory changes or even avoid the writing task completely.

For at least the past 30 years, research on student writing has supported the importance of teaching students to write in contrast to asking them to write (Rothstein, Rothstein, & Lauber, 2007, Langer, 2000, Atwell, 1998, Van Tassel-Baska, 1996, Graves, 1983). In *Writing As Learning* (2007) the authors state this crucial decision between asking and teaching by contrasting the differences. Many of us may recall our own school experiences when a teacher started with the words, “Go home and write an essay about...” Students’ hands would go up with questions such as, “How long does it have to be?” “What is an essay?” And finally, “Does this count for a grade?” Fortunately, we’ve come a little further with the concept of *The Writing Process* (Simmons, 1998, Scarborough, 2001), which has added the concepts of gathering

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information, drafting, self and peer editing, and revising. In addition, many writing approaches and programs now include “strategies” such as getting started, writing to a specific audience, finding a voice, and so forth (Marzano, 2004, 2001, Maxwell, 1996, Smith, 1982).

**Teaching Writing vs.  
Assigning Writing**

The National Commission on Writing, in 2003, stated that “the amount of time students spend writing should be at least doubled ... and that writing should be *assigned* (our italics) across the curriculum (p.4). The fallacy of this statement is not first focusing on *teaching writing* as a prerequisite to the assignment of writing, although the commission, in a later statement, adds that universities should require all prospective teachers to take courses in how to *teach* (our italics) writing (p. 5). The focus must be on *teaching* writing, meaning that all teachers of literacy-based subject areas need a model or blueprint for writing instruction and that the students learn and internalize this instructional model.

Beginning in the 1980s, when “writing” in schools began to take on the concept of being an integral part of literacy instruction, Evelyn Rothstein developed the model of Writing = Fluency + Organization or  $W=F+O$ . This simple “equation” meant that a writer must have words for writing and knowledge of the organizational format of specific types of writing, known as genres. The writer must be fluent and organized in order to write whatever specific genres she/he must write about (2007, Rothstein, Rothstein, and Lauber).

To the concept of  $W=F+O$ , Rothstein added 12 strategies that could develop writing skills for all ages and particularly for adolescent learners in every content area. These strategies would be integrated with the subject-area content and would align with four major English language arts standards for building literacy skills:

- Acquiring information and understanding
- Using oral and written language for self-expression
- Presenting opinions and personal perspectives

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- Using social interactions to enrich student understanding of diverse peoples and cultures.

### The Model for Teaching Writing

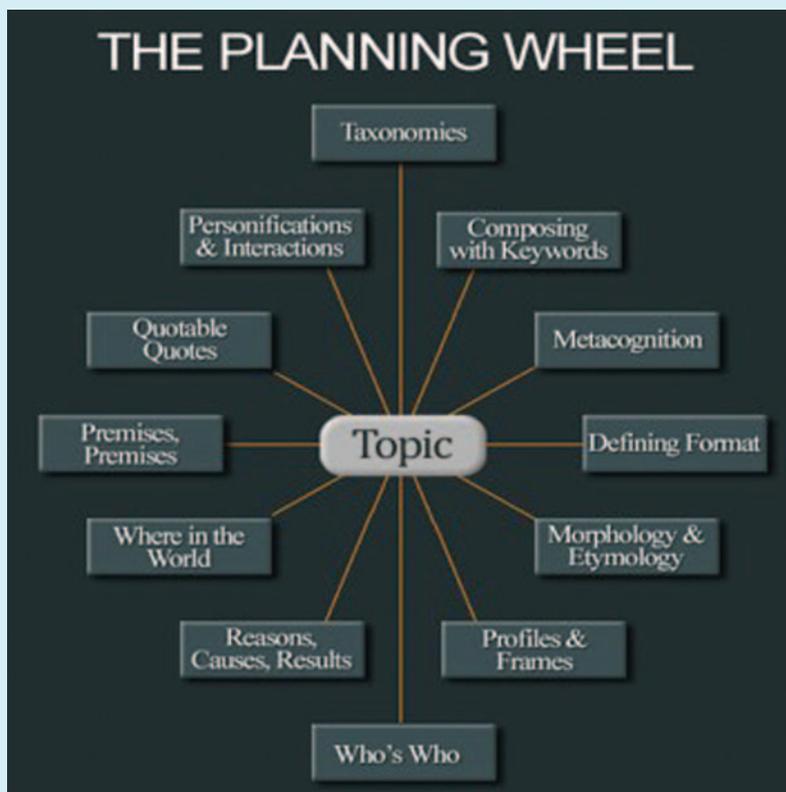
The model for the integration of teaching content area is illustrated in the Planning Wheel (Fig. 1) that presents the content of any subject as the central theme and its relationship to writing. The delivering of content is supported by strategies for:

- Building vocabulary (Taxonomies, Defining Format, and Morphology)

- Acquiring knowledge of the subject by studying people of accomplishment related to the subject (Who's Who)
- Making connections between the subject and its global impact (Where in the World?)
- Developing a repertory of specific writing genres for delivering the content (Composing with Keywords, Metacognition, Reasons, Causes, Results )
- Creating a variety of social interactions to enrich understanding of the subject (Premises, Quotable Quotes, Personifications and Interactions).

## METHODOLOGY

**Figure 1:**



## IMPLEMENTING THE MODEL

For the past several years, author Lyons has been teaching a NYSUT-sponsored writing course titled *Writing as Learning* to teachers and School-Related Professionals (SRPs), both urban and suburban, online and face-to-face. The vast majority of participants had never taken a course in the teaching of writing nor had they taken any courses for the purpose of enhancing their own writing development. Many were concerned about their own writing ability and a requirement that they share their writing — not only with the instructor,

but also with their peers. The participants were also concerned about the teaching task ahead of them, which would be to help adolescent learners create and improve their own writing.

A most recent course taught by author Lyons was to 25 SRPs who are teaching assistants, or TAs, in a suburban Long Island school district. Many SRPs are assigned to working with special education or at-risk students, and their knowledge of subject areas and writing in subject areas is essential in helping these students succeed. Yet, few, if any, of the participants in this course had completed college, nor had any of them taken any course on the teaching of writing to adolescents or other students, although they had often been assigned writing tasks during their own school years.

Like many teachers, the TAs were uncertain of their own writing abilities and were hesitant about their ability to assist students in writing. Learning how to teach students to write is a necessary requirement for both SRPs and the teachers they support. SRPs who know strategies for teaching writing have the advantage of both instructing students and sharing their knowledge with colleagues. As a result of this course, several of the SRPs were asked by the district special education supervisor to present a

workshop to other professionals in the district on the strategies and ideas they had learned.

## **GETTING STARTED: HAVE WORDS, CAN WRITE**

### **Planning Wheel Strategies: Taxonomies, Composing With Keywords, Metacognition**

Since *Writing as Learning* begins with the concept of fluency or “having words,” participants began by creating Taxonomies — ABC lists of words related to content-area topics. This simple but essential starting point eased any fears of being assigned writing or a writing topic at the start of the course. The participants breathed a sigh of relief when they realized they wouldn’t have to write an extended piece, either in class or at home. Nor would they have to hand in their papers or read their papers aloud to the teacher and their peers.

By simply creating a list of the words related to a content area, the participants could work together and share, bringing personal knowledge to the topic, and adding or revising as needed. They quickly realized that by creating their taxonomies, they had “something to say” about their topic.

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Many of us may recall our own school experiences when a teacher started with the words, “Go home and write an essay about...”

### Composing With Keywords

The next step in this procedure was for each participant to write a sentence using several words from the Taxonomy related to the topic. Once again, participants gained confidence. Now, they could easily share some of their knowledge, get peer approval, and realize, “By having words, I can begin to write.”

Following is an example from a participant who created a taxonomy on The Erie Canal and moved to Composing with Keywords, then Metacognition, and eventually writing a full descriptive piece on that topic.

The task was for the writer to select three words or phrases from the Taxonomy and write a sentence using the selected words.

The words selected : *canal, DeWitt Clinton, transportation and trade*

The sentence: *In July of 1817, DeWitt Clinton ordered the start of a canal which would connect Lake Erie to the Hudson River to increase transportation and trade.*

### Metacognition

By having the words of a topic and by having created sentences related to that topic, the writer is now prepared to create a first piece of text. As part of the teaching, the student writer learns

that “metacognition” is to think about what he or she already knows, and is then provided with a Frame to inform another person about that knowledge. The Frame is an outline giving the order of the presentation. Because many students have difficulty starting a piece of writing, we provide the student the opening sentence, together with the three transition words and the closing sentence. This Frame helps the student focus on three important aspects of his/her knowledge and can be expanded over time.

The first metacognition piece, illustrated below, was written by one of the TAs in the course. It includes many other words from the Taxonomy (which are bolded).

*I know that I know many things about the Erie Canal.*

*First, the Erie Canal was the inspiration of DeWitt Clinton, the **governor** of **New York** in 1817, for connecting the **Hudson River** to **Lake Erie**.*

*Next, many people made fun of this idea and started to call this Canal “**Clinton’s Ditch**.”*

*Finally, the Erie Canal was completed in 1825 at a cost of **seven million dollars**.*

*Now you know what I know about the Erie Canal.*

Following is an excerpt from the final piece or essay, which the writer composed after learning the other strategies of the Planning Wheel, which included Defining Format, Profiles, Who's Who, and Where in the World.

### Essay — The Erie Canal

*During the early part of the 1800s, New York was in need of getting goods, services, and people across the state faster and cheaper. DeWitt Clinton, who was the governor of New York at the time, wanted to build a canal that would link the Hudson River with Lake Erie. A canal is a human-made waterway built across land. This canal would allow boats to travel from New York City all the way to the Great Lakes.*

At each class session, participants reviewed the previously taught strategies which they had incorporated into the writing, and then moved on to learn and use additional strategies.

### Results

The success of this concept of teaching writing — not assigning writing — is exemplified by the reflections from the TAs, from the onset of the course to the end, several of which we have quoted, and the student results that follow.

“I have to be honest. When I heard I have to take this course, I felt scared. Writing is not one of my stronger

points. After being taught, I could not believe that everything that I wrote was mine. I left with the thought, ‘I can do that!’

“Having strategies gave me a formula to follow taxonomies for my words, profiles for organizing information, working in groups and having my peers listen and help and advise—teaching me something new about writing in every class. Now this is what I want to do for my students.”

“I could never get my thoughts on paper. I was disorganized. I now like to write!! I now see the possibility for children and I hope that I can teach my students what I was taught.”

The introduction of *Writing as Learning* began in the spring of 2009. Currently there are anecdotal records from the SRPs who shared examples of student work during the length of the course. The SRPs, and the teachers with whom they worked, reported significant improvement in student writing, including evidence of student knowledge of content, use of high-level vocabulary, and organization of ideas and concepts. Teachers taking the same course throughout New York and other states have reported similar results. In addition, many SRPs reported on their joy of having students who couldn't write or were fearful about writing hand in

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## Don't Assign Writing — Teach it!

Writing is how students connect the dots in their education.

papers with well-constructed sentences and interesting content.

By teaching students at all levels to write, we can make a significant change in their lives, giving them the ability to communicate at high levels, share ideas and knowledge, develop pride in what they have to say and how they say it, and have confidence in their own creativity. We firmly agree with the statement from the National Commission on Writing that “the nation’s leaders must place writing squarely in the center of the school agenda...because writing is how students connect the dots in their education (p. 3).”

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