



Writing Instruction in Schools Today

Writing instruction 30 years ago was a relatively simple affair: The typical assignment consisted of a few sentences setting out a topic, given in class and finished up for homework. Students were expected to write a page or less, to be graded by the teacher. Almost no class time was given over to writing instruction, or even to introducing the assignment. When students were asked to write, the teacher took an average of just over 3 minutes to introduce the assignment, answer the inevitable procedural questions (How many pages? Single or double spaced? Can it be in pencil?), and ask the students to start writing (Applebee, 1981).

The teaching of writing was generally the domain of the English language arts class. Although teachers of other subjects did ask their students to write, this was usually done to “show what you know,” not because the act of writing itself might have a special role in the acquisition of disciplinary knowledge and skill.

This portrait of writing instruction as it was over a quarter century ago, drawn from data collected in 1979–80 for Applebee’s *Writing in the Secondary School* (1981), provides the backdrop and points of comparison for the current study. At the time of the earlier study, the profession was just beginning to develop a systematic research base on learning to write and writing to learn, building from the work of Braddock, Lloyd-Jones, and Schoer (1963), Britton (1970; Britton et al., 1975), Emig (1971), and others (e.g., Gregg & Steinberg, 1980). Since then, a concentrated period of research on writing development, teaching, and learning has ensued, accompanied by active engagement with teachers through collaborations such as the National Writing Project. This burst of research led to the development of new approaches, which were in turn shared in workshops and conference sessions, and taken up by many teachers across the country.

As we explained in Chapter 1, much has changed since 1980: in our understanding of effective practice, in the institutional context that shapes instruction, and in the technologies available for students to use. But how

have these changes influenced the writing and writing instruction that students experience? That is the focus of this chapter, in which we provide an overview of current practice in the teaching of writing. Major topics include the amount of writing currently required, the audiences for student work, the impact of high-stakes tests, and the approaches to writing instruction in the core subject areas in middle and high schools across the United States.

HOW MUCH EXTENDED WRITING DO STUDENTS DO?

We asked teachers in the national survey how much extended writing (a paragraph or more) students were asked to do in a typical 9-week grading period, for each of the four core academic subjects: English, social studies/history, science, and math. Their responses indicated that, while students were asked to write more for their English classes than for any other subject, they wrote more for all their other subjects combined than they did for English. For papers of a page or less, for example, teachers reported requiring 5.5 papers for English during a 9-week grading period, 4.3 for social studies/history, 3.5 for science, and 1.1 for math. This adds up to 8.9 papers for the other subjects in comparison to 5.5 for English. The differences were smaller for papers of 1 or 2 pages (2.6 for English versus 3.5 for the other subjects combined) or 3 or more pages (1.1 for English as well as for the other subjects combined), but the pattern held. Clearly, students' experiences across the curriculum are likely to have an important impact on how they write and the qualities that they consider important in their writing.

Further, these figures suggest that even in English class students, on average, were not writing a great deal at the time of the national survey. Combining all three types of papers, the typical student was expected to produce approximately 1.6 pages a week of extended prose for English and another 2.1 pages for the other three subjects combined. When the National Assessment of Educational Progress asked a similar set of questions 15 years ago, results were quite similar: 40% of Grade 12 students reported hardly ever being asked to write a paper of three or more pages (Applebee & Langer, 2009). More recently, in the 2011 assessment, 10% of Grade 8 students and 14% of Grade 12 students reported they did no writing for homework for their English language arts classes in a typical week; another 31% at Grade 8 and 26% at Grade 12 reported a page or less of writing (results from the NAEP Data Explorer [NCES, n.d.]).

What is an appropriate length and frequency of writing may, of course, differ from subject to subject and from task to task; that is, what

may be an appropriate length for a particular type of writing in one subject may differ in another subject. However, as Writing Standard 10 of the *Common Core State Standards* (CCSSO & NGA, 2010) asserts, it is still important for students to write “routinely over extended time frames . . . and shorter time frames . . . for a range of tasks, purposes, and audiences” (p. 18) appropriate to each discipline.

The amount of extended writing—a paragraph or more—seems particularly limited when viewed against how students spend the rest of their time. Of the 8,542 separate assignments that we gathered from 138 case study students in the 20 schools in the five-state study (a sampling of all of their written work in the four core content areas during a semester), only 19% of assignments represented extended writing of a paragraph or more; all the rest consisted of fill-in-the-blank and short-answer exercises, and copying of information directly from the teacher’s presentations—activities that are best described as writing without composing. (Results were similar for middle and high school students, with 21% and 18% of their work, respectively, involving extended writing.)

Classroom observations found a similar emphasis, with students having pencil-on-paper (or, less often, fingers on keyboards) much of the time, but very little of it involving extended writing. In the middle school classes only 4% of observed class time was devoted to writing of a paragraph or more, rising to 8% in high school. Although low, this is a significant increase over results from 1979–80, when only 4% of observed class time in high school classes involved extended writing. (Middle school classes were not observed in the earlier study, so comparable data are not available.)

Even in the schools from the five-state study, selected for their emphasis on writing instruction, some of the teachers commented that there was less writing going on than might be expected:

I don’t do it [use writing] as much as I would want to do it. Most is done through notes, summarizing. Sometimes I have students do comic strips. I try to make it fun. (Grade 6 social studies teacher)

After a visit to a semiurban middle school in the study, the field researchers hinted at some of the constraints that limit the amount of writing assigned:

While the current administration would like more writing, at present it’s not a major focus. . . . All of the teachers agreed that writing and writing across the curriculum are important to student success.

However, they also stated that the current cuts in funding and pressure to teach a certain amount of specified content before state tests come around have drastically limited writing in their classes.

Teachers who have long-term institutional memory point to a time (about 15 years ago) when there was ongoing, excellent professional development in writing from both outside (a National Writing Project affiliate) and inside the district (writing project fellow who worked in the district). The district at that time had good funding and used it for professional development. (Field researchers' summary and interpretation of school visit)

Overall, in comparison to the 1979–80 study, students in our study were writing more in all subjects, but that writing tended to be short and often did not provide students with opportunities to use composing as a way to think through the issues, to show the depth or breadth of their knowledge, or to make new connections or raise new issues.

WHO READS WHAT STUDENTS WRITE?

Much of the emphasis in improving writing instruction over the past several decades has focused on providing authentic tasks that would be read by responsive audiences, including the teacher interacting with students about the growth of the ideas and understandings they have expressed in writing. This differs qualitatively from show-you-know writing where the teacher wants students to include particular information and students must figure out what is wanted. In the first case, the student and teacher are thinking about the student's understanding and how it can be refined and further developed; the student is an active agent in meaning development. In the second case the student is engaged in guessing what the teacher wants rather than what the ideas mean.

Teachers in 1979–80 and again in the present study were asked directly about who would read the writing from a typical class. Their responses show a noticeable shift over time, with students today being considerably more likely to have teachers respond to their work as part of what James Britton and his colleagues (1975) called a "teacher-learner dialogue" in which teachers react without necessarily assigning a grade. The percent of high school teachers in the four core subjects who reported reacting to students' writing without grading rose from 12% to 20% across these 30 years, and was even higher in middle school (35%). Similarly, the percent of high school teachers who frequently reacted as

well as graded rose from 52% in the earlier study to 80% in the present study. Both sets of responses are evidence of a heightened concern with engaging with the content of student work.

Students today also are considerably more likely to be asked to share their work with other students. Over half of middle school and 44% of high school English teachers reported frequently asking students to share work with other students; in the earlier study, only 16% reported regularly asking students to share their work. Similar increases were apparent in responses from science and social studies teachers (increasing from 1% to 15% and from 3% to 7%, respectively), though they were clearly less enthusiastic than their peers in the English department.

WHAT IS THE EFFECT OF HIGH-STAKES TESTS?

That we teach in an era of high-stakes tests is more than obvious, but what can we say about the effects of such testing on the teaching of writing? At the middle school level, 81% of the teachers of English and 79% of teachers of math reported that the students in a typical class would take a high-stakes test *this year*; the comparable figures were 40% for science and 36% for social studies/history. At the high school level, 48% of the English teachers and 70% of the math teachers reported a high-stakes test *this year*, compared with 56% in science and 41% in social studies/history classes. For most subjects, three quarters or more of the teachers at both levels reported their students would face a high-stakes test in their subject *in this or a later year*. The only exception was for social studies/history, where only 58% at middle school and 50% at high school expected their students to have to take a high-stakes exam in their subject.

When asked about the importance of various external exams in shaping curriculum and instruction, the state exam was rated as important by 86% of the teachers at middle school, followed by district exams (64%). At the high school level, state exams again topped the list, rated as important by 66%, followed by district exams (48%), SAT and ACT exams (46%), and Advanced Placement or International Baccalaureate exams (30%). Unfortunately, as we will see, responses to other questions on the survey suggest that the importance placed on these exams does not auger well for the teaching of writing. Another series of questions asked what percent of the grade on the high-stakes test would be based on open-ended responses of any sort. The responses make it clear that relatively little writing was required even in English (an average of 30% of the high-stakes grade in high school, only 17% in middle school). Comparable figures for other subjects at the high school level were 26% for social

studies/history, 12% for science, and 11% for math. These numbers are of particular concern because they included *any* open-ended responses, from single sentences to whole essays, as well as show-your-work and explain-your-problem-solving tasks in math and science. Even including these abbreviated tasks, the use of writing as a way to demonstrate content knowledge or disciplinary thinking was minimal.

English end-of-course exams, in contrast to high-stakes external exams, gave slightly more emphasis to extended writing. Teachers reported that 24% of the total grade in middle school, and 41% in high school, would be based on writing of at least paragraph length. But even these somewhat higher numbers mean that writing on average mattered less than multiple-choice or short-answer questions in assessing performance in English. (Percentages for the other three subjects did not differ noticeably from those for the high-stakes exams.)

Some teachers and administrators, in fact, were quite explicit about aligning their own testing with the high-stakes exams their students would face:

I think our school gives significant emphasis [to writing]. One of the things that acts as a limiting factor on that emphasis is the TAKS [Texas Assessment of Knowledge and Skills] test, and only in English are students required to write in order to pass the exit level TAKS. In social studies, science, and math there are only multiple-choice components. I think the pressure to do well on TAKS sometimes takes away from the time that teachers feel that they have available and the energy they are willing to commit to [writing]. We spend a lot of time on TAKS preparation and, unfortunately, I think teachers would be nonsensical not to prepare kids for TAKS. (High school principal)

When asked how they prepare students for the high-stakes tests they face, teachers reported heavy emphasis on some familiar types of test preparation, including frequent “test prep” on the particular types of question that appear on the exam (76%), and using sample questions from old exams or commercial practice materials that present similar items (63%). They also reported making frequent use of rubrics or scoring systems similar to those that would be used on the exam (68%), and of incorporating the types of writing from the exam in the regular curriculum rather than providing “test prep” (71%). Although the provision of rubrics and the use of curriculum standards and assessments to align the curriculum can both be valuable strategies (see Langer, 2004), on balance the teachers’ responses suggest that high-stakes tests were having a very

direct and limiting effect on classroom emphases. And given the dearth of writing required on most tests, this created a powerful momentum away from the teaching of writing.

On another question, some 55% of English teachers reported frequent practice in timed, on-demand writing, another seeming response to the writing tasks that are included on some high-stakes tests. Such tasks were less frequent in subjects that were less likely to have on-demand essay questions: 24% for social studies/history, 17% in science, and 12% in math.

One teacher described the effects of the tests on the curriculum in her school:

I teach sixth-grade social studies. They do a lot of writing in my class. We try to get them to echo the questions in their answers. And first, we probably start with basic sentence-building skills and eventually expand into writing paragraphs. Then, in eighth grade, they have their DBQs [document-based essays]. So getting them used to writing sentences, then paragraphs, then into essays. (Middle school social studies teacher)

Others described how what counts on the exam influenced, perhaps unintentionally, curriculum and instruction. The following comments are typical:

Everybody's willing and enthusiastic every time we talk about [writing across the curriculum], and we get really excited. . . . But how often do you really get a chance to do something like that? . . . [We benchmark in math] four times a year, plus the state test, plus the practice state test. To give you an idea, we had a practice test middle of February and here it is the second week in March and we're doing another benchmark assessment. So we're losing another 2 days of work, and I could write a paragraph about that, but you couldn't publish it. (Middle school math chair)

I used to do a research project but don't do it anymore because of the emphasis on tests. Research projects are so much more time intensive—go to bare bones to prepare for tests. (Eighth-grade history teacher)

Writing is essential as it promotes higher order thinking, and it demonstrates to a teacher the extent to which students are understanding or making sense of the content. Currently high-stakes testing is at odds, at least in history, because there is mostly multiple-choice testing. (High school history teacher)

In the attempt to focus on what is most essential for later success, many state standards and their accompanying assessments have limited the range of purposes for writing. One eighth-grade language arts teacher described how writing instruction today compared with instruction at an earlier stage of her career:

We don't do the fun things anymore. You can't give them a picture with a maze and ask them to write the adventure of what happened. You can't give them creative things; it helps with their fluency but it doesn't help with "business." It's all business now. It's all about standards-based teaching and teaching the standards.

The effects of examinations were not all bad, however; schools that focused on the International Baccalaureate or certain Advanced Placement examinations found that the exams increased their attention to writing:

Because we're an IB school, there is a big emphasis on students being able to reflect on their learning; to reflect in some type of way that they have learned something. So there is a big emphasis on writing that reflection. So they're getting writing in all their classes; not just in the language arts class. (Sixth-grade language arts teacher)

I guess 15 years ago, I would never have asked my kids to justify anything; it was just an answer, and I graded it. And now, I am trying to get them to be able to validate what their answer is and be able to put it into words so that they can support it. . . . I think one of the main influences in that has been the AP test, probably. (High school math chair)

And some changes in state exams do seem to be reinforcing the place of writing in the curriculum. A middle school math teacher in New York State explained the value she saw:

When kids are writing, I can get a sense of what they understand, like taking a picture of what they understand—for assessment. Writing is a study skill for them. When they write in their own words, they understand the content better. It's a translation of sorts of what the book is saying. [It's] also a form of communication.

In the earlier study, carried out during 1979–80, pressure from external exams was nonexistent. Norm-referenced standardized tests were used to assess the progress of individual students, but they were not tied

to the curriculum and did not carry high stakes for schools and teachers. In the current study, for better or for worse, external examinations are driving many aspects of curriculum and instruction.

WHAT KINDS OF WRITING INSTRUCTION DO TEACHERS EMPHASIZE?

For classes that were asked to do any writing of at least paragraph length, teachers were asked about their typical approaches to the teaching of writing. Teachers of all subjects reflected a concern with being clear about what was expected in particular types of writing assignments. The most frequent emphasis in all four subject areas was to clearly specify the specific parts (depending on type of writing, such things as introduction, body paragraphs, hypotheses, evidence, citations from passages, summary, or conclusions) that must be included (ranging from 94% of English teachers to 69% of math teachers); this was paralleled with an across-subject emphasis on providing rubrics that highlighted the characteristics of a good response (ranging from 82% of English teachers to 52% of math teachers).

Process-oriented approaches to writing instruction were widespread and easily identified in English classes (91% frequently spending class time on generating and organizing ideas before writing, and 90% teaching specific strategies for planning, drafting, revising, and organizing), and to a lesser extent in social studies/history (61% reporting class time on generating and organizing ideas before writing, and 41% teaching specific writing strategies). Also popular was providing models of effective responses for students to read, analyze, and emulate (85% in English, 43% in other subjects). This can be useful in helping students develop a clearer understanding of what is expected in different kinds of writing tasks.

Collaborative work remains less popular than teacher-led activities. Some 60% of English teachers reported frequently having students work together on their writing, and 44% reported organizing a workshop environment. Both approaches were less popular in other subject areas: Some 41% of teachers of the other subjects reported asking students to work together, and only 13% reported organizing a workshop environment for student work.

The following notes from a classroom observation illustrate how some of these emphases came together in a 12th-grade social studies class to support students' revisions of their work:

Teacher opened class explaining that their "Privacy Project Portfolios" were due next week. Today they'd have the opportunity to do

a Gallery Walk . . . and give feedback (using feedback forms and rubrics) on portfolios before they're turned in.

Teacher outlined what the 1–5 scale meant in more specific terms. Rubrics clearly defining 1–5 are posted in the back of the room and also distributed for reference during the Gallery Walk. After expectations have been clearly outlined, students begin their Gallery Walk with their small groups, evaluating all projects except their own. Groups will then receive the feedback from the rest of the class in order to make revisions before the project is due.

Students are heard intensively (but quietly) reviewing the criteria rubric, trying to come to consensus on what an appropriate score will be for each section. Students are clearly actively engaged in the process, and the discussions and process seem familiar to them. The teacher was left free to monitor small groups, and have one-on-one discussions as needed regarding the evaluation/feedback process. Students were comfortable and familiar with the rubric, so much of Ms. H's time was spent observing and "listening in." She would occasionally step in and ask some pointed questions in order to elicit thinking about the rubric and the process.

At the end of class they were able to briefly discuss, when they gave a 1, why they gave a 1. Ms H: "Hopefully this will create a sense of urgency, that even if you thought you were done, you're not." Revision was encouraged.

As a set, these activities reflect a much more sophisticated understanding of effective writing instruction than was evident in 1979–80. In the earlier study, instruction took place mostly as a response to completed work, rather than as a systematic attempt to clarify the task and to provide strategies and collaborative activities that would help students learn to complete the task successfully. Only 32% of English teachers in the earlier survey, for example, reported making regular use of model responses, compared with 85% in the present study; only 37% reported brainstorming activities before writing, compared with 91% spending time on generating and organizing ideas in classrooms today.

The complication is that although teachers seemed to have a better understanding of appropriate techniques to use when they assign writing, they still did not assign much of it. Competing priorities, such as test preparation, constrained the amount of time given to writing instruction. Classroom observations in the 20 schools selected for local reputations for excellence in the teaching of writing represent "best case" scenarios, both in the selection of the schools, and in the fact that teachers were aware that our teams of observers were interested in the teaching of writing.

Even so, the percent of class time focused on any aspect of writing instruction was very small. In the English classes observed, 6% of time was focused on the teaching of explicit writing strategies; 6% on the study of models; 4% on evaluating writing, including discussion of rubrics or standards; 4% on vocabulary; 3% on structure and organization; 1% on grammar or usage; and 1% on spelling. (Since multiple things were often going on at once, summing these percentages would overestimate the time devoted to writing instruction.) To put the numbers in perspective, in a 50-minute period, students would have had on average just over 3 minutes of instruction related to explicit writing strategies (the most frequent emphasis observed), or a total of 2 hours and 22 minutes in a 9-week grading period.

Writing-related instruction was observed most often in English classes, but the other subjects had their own particular emphases. Science classes put most emphasis on the development of vocabulary (9% of observed time), coupled with the study of models (5%) and a focus on explicit writing strategies (3%), both typically in the context of the ubiquitous lab report. Math classes also emphasized the study of models (10%) demonstrating appropriate steps in solving mathematical problems, and vocabulary (4%). Social studies/history classes had the least emphasis on writing-related instruction, with most attention to the study of models (3% of class time) and to rubrics or standards for evaluation (2%).

Comparable data are not available from the earlier study, which found that most writing instruction came after the fact, in teacher comments and suggestions on completed work.

WRITING THEN AND NOW

The snapshot of writing instruction presented here looks quite different from the picture that emerged in 1979–80. In 1979–80 students were typically provided with a question to be answered in a page or less, with instruction taking place after the fact, in the comments and responses that teachers offered on completed work. In contrast, teachers today reported emphasizing a variety of research-based instructional practices (Graham & Perrin, 2007), including clearly specifying what is required in a particular type of writing; teaching specific strategies for prewriting, writing, and revision; and using models of successful responses for students to analyze, critique, and emulate.

If notions of good instruction have changed, for a variety of reasons the typical classroom still did not pay much attention to extended writing. In 1979–80 the majority of the writing that students completed was writ-

ing without composing—short-answer or fill-in-the-blank tasks, or copying from the board, where the resulting “text” was completely structured by the teacher or textbook. In the current study that picture looked much the same, with students completing many more pages of exercises and copying than they did of original writing of even a paragraph in length. And even some of the extended writing that students did complete was constrained in the current study as practice for on-demand, timed assessments. The instruction that occurred in such cases was limited to the skills necessary for successful performance on the specific types of writing included in the assessment, rather than on the development of the skills and strategies that would serve a student well in the varied tasks that make up the much larger domain of writing that students will encounter in higher education and the workplace.

For Example: Two Social Studies Tasks, Then and Now

We can illustrate the changes that have taken place with two examples, one drawn from the earlier study, and the other from the present one. Both are social studies tasks that ask students to deal with broad historical questions.

Then. The question from the earlier study given in Figure 2.1, on the changes that occurred during the Reformation, is in many ways an impossible task, requiring book-length treatment to be handled well. It becomes a possible task only when it is seen as a request for a summary of material that has already been covered by the teacher or textbook. To do well, the students have to have learned a series of generalizations about the Reformation, and must be able to repeat them in their own words; the task does not ask for original analysis or synthesis.

Now. Now consider the task in Figure 2.2, on the causes of the French Revolution. Like the question from the earlier study, this is essentially a test of what students know about a particular historical period. Indeed, the instructions begin by asking them how they would answer the ques-

FIGURE 2.1. A Typical Writing Task from 1979–80

Western Europe on the eve of the Reformation was a civilization going through great changes. In a well-written essay describe the political, economic, social, and cultural changes Europe was going through at the time of the Reformation. (25 points) (Ninth-grade social studies)

Note. From Applebee 1981, p. 74.

tion based on what they have already learned. The task continues, however, providing them with a set of new source materials to analyze in light of their knowledge of the historical period and in light of the question that is posed. This is a considerably more difficult task than the earlier example, and its structure provides a variety of supports to help students complete it successfully (including some comprehension questions that are not presented here, following each of the documents).

Such document-based questions are typically accompanied by a rubric that explains how the essay will be graded, providing a tool for revision and self-evaluation. New York State, where this question originated, offers a generic rubric for such document-based questions (New York State Education Department, Office of State Assessment, 2007). A superior paper (scoring 5 on a 0 to 5 scale):

- Thoroughly develops all aspects of the task evenly and in depth
- Is more analytical than descriptive (analyzes, evaluates, and/or creates information)
- Incorporates relevant information from at least xxx documents [xxx varies by item]
- Incorporates substantial relevant outside information
- Richly supports the theme with many relevant facts, examples, and details
- Demonstrates a logical and clear plan of organization; includes an introduction and a conclusion that are beyond a restatement of the theme

A minimally scoring paper (score of 1), on the other hand:

- Minimally develops some aspects of the task
- Is descriptive; may lack understanding, application, or analysis
- Makes vague, unclear references to the documents or consists primarily of relevant and irrelevant information copied from the documents
- Presents little or no relevant outside information
- May demonstrate a weakness in organization; may lack focus; may contain digressions; may not clearly identify which aspect of the task is being addressed; may lack an introduction and/or conclusion

This task is typical of many that we have seen across subject areas, with built-in scaffolding and an obvious attempt to be clear about what success will require. Many of the tasks we have seen exhibit the prob-

FIGURE 2.2. A Typical Writing Task Now

CAUSES OF THE FRENCH REVOLUTION

Historical Context: The French Revolution of 1789 had many long-range causes. Political, social, and economic conditions in France contributed to the discontent felt by many French people—especially those of the third estate. The ideas of the intellectuals of the Enlightenment brought new views of government and society. The American Revolution also influenced the coming of the French Revolution.

Directions: The following question is based on the accompanying documents in Part A. As you analyze the documents, take into account both the source of the document and the author’s point of view. Be sure to:

1. Carefully read the document-based question. Consider what you already know about this topic. How would you answer the question if you had no documents to examine?
2. Now, read each document carefully, underlining key phrases and words that address the document-based question. You may also wish to use the margin to make brief notes. Answer the questions which follow each document.
3. Based on your own knowledge and the information found in the documents, formulate a thesis that directly answers the question.
4. Organize supportive and relevant information into a brief outline.
5. Write a well-organized essay proving your thesis. The essay should be logically presented and should include information both from the documents and from your own knowledge outside of the documents.

Question: What were the most important causes of the French Revolution? (Discuss three.) (10th-grade social studies)

lems that are buried even in this example, however. Although the task requires students to work with new material, the underlying task remains one that begins with a restatement or summary of points that have been developed in previous classes or in the textbook, and then asks students to use the new documents to illustrate (or “richly support”) those points rather than to generate new understandings. There is also a tendency in tasks of this type to generate formulaic writing. In this particular case, the admonition to “discuss three” causes of the French Revolution points strongly toward a five-paragraph theme, albeit one to be elaborated with new details drawn from the accompanying primary source documents.

Hillocks (2002) noted this tendency toward formulaic writing in his critique of state writing assessments, and teachers in the schools we studied were quite aware of the dangers, if resigned to the necessity. As one teacher put it,

I think we become repetitive, but it's the nature of the beast—same things with TAKS (Texas Assessment of Knowledge and Skills); this is what you have to write, this is what has to be included, you have to include this number of quotes, you have to respond to your quote, so I think our essays become the same thing. We are able to use different literature, but the essays tend to have the same process. Same outline.

I think we need to move away from TAKS and move more into extended writing. Begin with this idea, add to it, add to it, add to it, rather than just little chunks. Our students now have a hard time finding a focus and staying with it with anything long enough to have extended-writing assignments. (12th-grade English teacher)

On the brighter side, some teachers have been successful in revising their curriculum and instruction in response to new knowledge about effective instruction, resulting in students who do well on high-stakes tests because they are immersed in a rich and engaging curriculum (Langer, 2004). At the end of their visit, one of our teams of field researchers described such a high school program, warts and all:

From the teachers observed and interviewed, it seemed the majority of teachers had an in-depth understanding of how writing can propel thinking, how writing can help students understand content, and how writing can help teachers understand what students come away with. They draw on a wide repertoire of approaches and strategies. Most impressive is that teachers have specific intentions and are very reflective about the writing strategies they teach. Some of the strategies observed were: deconstructing prompts, how to pose questions, how to anticipate readers' questions, strategies for paraphrasing, Socratic Seminars, use of criteria charts, writing on "Classroom Graffiti Walls." (Field researchers' summary and interpretation of school visit)

THE BOTTOM LINE

Clearly the 30 years since the previous national study have seen a great deal of development in teachers' conceptions of writing and its importance in learning. Across subject areas, teachers voice an understanding of the ways in which writing can contribute to learning, see writing as a valuable tool for assessing students' understanding, and in many cases see unique and particular roles that writing could play within their own disciplines.

At the same time, the actual writing that goes on in typical classrooms across the United States remains dominated by tasks in which the teacher does all the composing, and students are left only to fill in missing information, whether copying directly from a teacher's presentation, completing worksheets and chapter summaries, replicating highly formulaic essay structures keyed to high-stakes tests, or writing to "show they know" the particular information the teacher is seeking. Writing as a way to study, learn, and go beyond—as a way to construct knowledge or generate new networks of understandings (Langer, 2011a, 2011b)—is rare.