

Preparing Students for the Future: A Roadmap to Improve Writing as a Key to Success

For almost 20 years, there has been relentless pressure in education policy discussions to regard scores on formal assessments as the most important indicator of a student's (and teacher's) achievement over primary and secondary education. This focus on testing has been paralleled by a steady rise in the expectations expressed in national content standards for both teachers and students. More students than ever before are expected to be 'college-and-career ready' at the end of secondary school. Both of the major college entrance examinations (ACT and SAT) include complex texts and evidence-based reasoning in both verbal and mathematics measures. Both of these assessments have benchmarked scores against the college and career readiness standards.

A critical element in that readiness is the ability to write clear, coherent and/or well-argued prose. Students are now required to demonstrate their understanding of claims and evidence, often as presented in complex texts, as well as cogent and well-organized reactions to the topics or issues at hand. This could be agreement, disagreement or a general balanced critique of the texts, but regardless of the focus, the expectation for students at every level is to show increasing mastery of writing that is structured around argument or explanation supported by specific evidence.

Where Are We Now?

A recent *EdWeek* article (<http://www.edweek.org/tm/articles/2016/06/20/as-teachers-tackle-new-student-writing-expectations-support.html?intc=es>) comments both on these expectations for student achievement and on teachers' perceptions of a lack of systematic support for their efforts to develop their students' writing ability. As the article makes clear, teachers are indeed rising to the challenge by requiring more writing. But, in the age of texting and tweeting, there is a sizeable gap between what students typically can produce—a paragraph—and what is required in the much more demanding world of Core Standards writing. And teachers are clearly finding it difficult to narrow that gap in a way that can demonstrably and systematically improve students' writing.

A Toolkit for Teaching Writing Effectively

So—what might a support system for teachers of writing actually look like? A framework for a disciplined and consistent approach to improving students’ writing over time—from, say grade 3 through grade 12—must have six key elements:

- First, it is critical to have **some trustworthy measure of a student’s current writing achievement**, one that allows comparison of each student’s writing to other students in the same class and at the same level, as well as to external cohorts of students at the same developmental level.
- Second, **the measurement of current achievement levels should be external to the classroom**. Teachers already have enough to do without adding the burden of creating and scoring some benchmark assessment. In addition, teachers cannot turn off their deep knowledge of each individual writer to provide the absolute neutrality comparable scoring requires.
- Third, the kinds of **writing samples students must produce for an external benchmark assessment should mirror the kinds of writing they need to learn to master in the classroom**. The benchmark will be useful only to the extent that it resembles the writing tasks teachers want students to master.
- Fourth, **the scoring of the external benchmarks should be applicable and useful in the classroom as well**. It should clearly and specifically articulate a framework for writing that marks levels of achievement in the critical elements of accomplished writing regardless of the genre (that is, narrative, argumentative, explanatory).
 - This framework should reflect the past three decades of research on developing effective writing, which suggests that there are common elements, or traits, of effective writing. These traits do not necessarily develop at the same pace in an individual writer, and different writers need more intensive practice in some areas than in others. The trait-based approach to scoring offers an analytical look at the profile of

strengths and weaknesses of any writer's work, and allows for focused planning of next steps in instruction.

One of the most common approaches to such a scoring rubric is the six-trait rubric, one example of which can be found in the Common Core Standards support materials. Writing assessments and supplemental learning tools from select external providers such as ERB's (Educational Records Bureau) WrAP (Writing Assessment Program) also use a six trait rubric in scoring student writing. While 6-trait rubrics like ERB's, the Common Core's and Education Northwest's (to name just 3 examples) differ in small details, they all articulate the stages in the development of the essential elements of effective writing as those have been defined across writing standards, including NCTE, Common Core and most individual states.

- Using such a rubric to evaluate ALL students' writing, with expectations geared to the developmental level of the writer being evaluated, allows both teachers and students to develop a common vocabulary and set of targets for learning, one that remains relevant and useful even as students grow older and the expectations for their writing necessarily grow more demanding.
- Fifth, **teachers need to have an overall sense of the expected progression in learning over time**—what is a realistic expectation at 3rd grade? 5th grade? 9th grade? How can a teacher plan instruction for students at different levels of writing skill development? How is a teacher to think about both immediate and long-term goals? How can all writing instruction work consistently toward common goals, across different grade levels and teachers?
 - The answers to all of these questions can be found in documents called "Learning Progressions." In a Learning Progression, the critical traits found in the rubric used for evaluating student writing are described at each level of achievement, from low to high. Further, the Learning Progression for, say, 3rd grade can be directly compared with the Learning Progression for 5th grade, and the essential differences in student expectations and achievement, trait by trait, can be examined and compared. The

progression leads directly to a systematic instructional plan to develop each student’s writing proficiency.

- Sixth, **actual externally-scored student writing samples that illustrate every trait and score level articulated in the rubric are necessary**, so that teachers can see what the words and score levels in the rubric actually mean when they are embodied in student writing. It is one thing to describe excellent organization as “carefully organized from beginning to end, with a logical sequence of events, an elegant flow of ideas and clear closure.” It is entirely another to see an actual 4th-grade writing sample that achieves this score for organization. Teachers will immediately and intuitively sense the differences when they see student writing samples in a way no amount of exposure to the rubric alone can accomplish.

FINDING AND USING A SUPPORT SYSTEM FOR TEACHING WRITING

We all intuitively know that a test is just a test unless you do something with the results. ERB has taken this notion to the next level, and this fall will be introducing WRIIT™ (Writing Resources for Insight Interpretation and Teaching). This toolkit is an integral companion to ERB’s WrAP (Writing Assessment Program) writing assessment, and emphasizes the importance of transparency in scoring, and creates a clear roadmap to continual improvement in writing.

- The ERB WRIIT™ toolkit offers schools and teachers an easy-to-use set of online tools that link all six critical parts of the teacher support system.
- In fact, Jody Stout, an elementary school teach from the Lamplighter School in Dallas Texas, and a participant in helping ERB develop some of the WRIIT™ tools, says,

“The toolkit can actively support teachers and students in the classroom to support the processes of goal setting, instruction, feedback, assessment and revision.” Furthermore, she goes on to say, “The digital alignment of student work with scoring rubrics and progression charts streamlines the teacher-work intensive process of identifying individual student needs and strengths. The result is the opportunity to quickly pinpoint goals for

individualized instruction when working with students to improve their writing.”

- Partnering with schools to develop students’ writing has been a core part of ERB’s mission for decades. ERB’s WrAP (Writing Assessment Program), along with its new companion, the WRIIT™ toolkit, and the Pathways to Writing with WPP (the Writing Practice Program) are all designed to provide external benchmarks, ongoing formative assessments, and instructional tools for teachers and students to use all year
- In addition to the six key elements, a useful support system for teaching writing might include a bank of writing prompts similar to those used for the external benchmark assessment. These prompts, which can be used in the classroom for practice, and cloned by the teacher using different texts or short prompts for variety, allow for consistent approaches to developing writing skills over time. As students become familiar with the expectations for accomplished writing and as they begin to recognize the differences among rubric scores for different traits, they will become increasingly self-monitoring and independent—also a career and college-readiness skill. ERB’s WRIIT™ resources include such a bank of writing prompts, all of them linked to scored samples of students at the level for which the prompt was developed.
- The toolkit of six essential elements also fosters teacher collaboration across grade levels. It is no longer necessary for each teacher to invent his or her own approach to teaching writing, hoping for the best and struggling to measure growth over time because there is no consistent approach from one grade to the next. Indeed, the framework provided by the essential tools *lessens* the burden for teachers, even as it provides concrete evidence of how students are doing and what they are learning to do better over time.

What Matters Most

The Rubric

The foundation for any school’s effective writing program is commitment to a common vocabulary of evaluation. This vocabulary defines and specifies the attributes of

student writing at every level of achievement and development, and across all essential features of the prose. These attributes are linked across developmental levels, so that the growth in mastery of the critical features of effective writing can be tracked over time. This vocabulary of evaluation is the basis for instructional design, for evaluation of student responses, for individualized instructional plans. A well-developed rubric provides support for all of these pedagogical activities. Teachers will immediately and intuitively sense the differences when they see student writing samples in a way no amount of exposure to the rubric alone can accomplish. It is even better when these samples are hyperlinked from the student’s scored report to support easy interpretation of results, as they are in ERB’s WRIT™ toolkit.

Practice *Can* Make Perfect

It is a commonplace that “you get what you measure.” Nowhere is this more evident than in the endeavor to develop students’ writing skills. However, if what you measure varies year by year or teacher by teacher, if what is valued changes depending on who happens to be the teacher, it is virtually impossible to attain steady improvement in students’ mastery of writing. There is no doubt that students must write regularly to get better at writing. At the same time, practice alone is insufficient—the practice must be aimed at some defined and consistent goal. And the measurement of progress toward the goal must be consistent regardless of a student’s teacher or developmental level. The power of a common vocabulary of evaluation is to ensure this consistency for all students.

In implementing an effective student writing program, what matters most is a trusted partner and easy-to-use tools that provide timely, meaningful insights to you and your students, and that result in measurable improvements in writing over time.

Visit erblearn.org/writing for additional information on all of ERB’s writing programs.

For additional information please contact ERB’s Executive Director of Writing, Pam Appleton at pappleton@erblearn.org or [646.503.2619](tel:646.503.2619)

ERB (Educational Records Bureau) is a not-for-profit educational service organization providing admission and achievement assessments, along with instructional services, for PreK-Grade 12 to over 2000 independent, faith-based and select public schools worldwide. For over 85 years, ERB has been a trusted source and partner to its member schools, helping them to build their communities, guide instruction and curriculum by putting assessment insights into action, and supporting student learning.

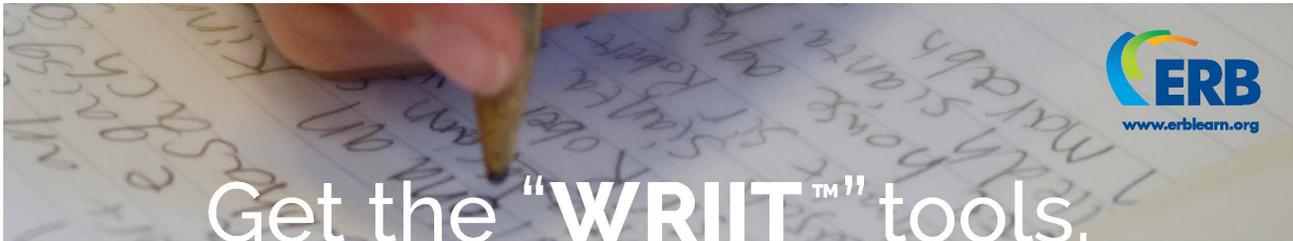
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Practice

WPP (Writing Practice Program)

Students can practice writing essays and stories online anytime, anywhere with instant scoring, targeted tutorials, and a variety of score reports to track progress. [Learn more at www.erblearn.org/WPP](http://www.erblearn.org/WPP).

Assess

WrAP (Writing Assessment Program)

Assess student writing online or with paper tests using a variety of prompts that include optional stimulus passages, different genres, and more. [Learn more at www.erblearn.org/WrAP](http://www.erblearn.org/WrAP).

Teach

WRIIT (Writing Resources for Insight, Interpretation, and Teaching)

Access a robust online network of anchor sets, learning progressions, and more to plan instructional next-steps. [Learn more at www.erblearn.org/WRIIT](http://www.erblearn.org/WRIIT).

Free writing practice tools and webinar!

Join a **free webinar** to learn about our writing tools and **receive WPP for free***. Webinar is held in September—date pending. For more information and to RSVP email WrAPwebinarDA@erblearn.org.

ERB has provided schools with assessments and instructional services for over 85 years. [Learn more at www.erblearn.org](http://www.erblearn.org).

*ERB will award free WPP access to 30 students at the first 25 schools who sign-up for this webinar.