chapter
ONE

Improving Student Writing

Challenges and Expectations

Writing is complex, and so is the instruction that a school must provide if its students are to reach the high standards of learning expected of them. Even the most accomplished writers say that writing is challenging, most notably because there is so much uncertainty embedded in the process of doing it. The writer doesn't always know beforehand where to begin, much less how to proceed. Writing doesn't take shape all at once in fluent sentences and organized paragraphs. The more complex the subject or task, the more disorderly and unpredictable the journey can be. Not even experienced writers "get it right" the first time through. Most would agree with *New Yorker* writer E. B. White when he said that "the best writing is rewriting." Writing is hard because it is a struggle of thought, feeling, and imagination to find expression clear enough for the task at hand.

Doing it well means being both a writer and a reader. As writer, we look through language and struggle to discover what we mean to say; as reader (of our own work), we look at language with an editor's eye to be sure we've found the right words to say what we mean. "Read and revise, reread and revise," counsels literary critic Jacques Barzun; "keep reading and revising until your text seems adequate to your thought." Sometimes, the professionals tell us, this means letting yourself write poorly at the start, with the expectation of improving it further down the line. "You have to get the bulk of it done," says writer Larry Gelbart, "and then you

start to refine it. You have to put down less-than-marvelous material just to keep going, whatever you think the end is going to be—which may be something else altogether by the time you get there."[1]

White, Barzun, and Gelbart are variously describing what researchers call the recursive nature of writing. Studies of how writers actually work show them shuffling through phases of planning, reflection, drafting, and revision, though rarely in a linear fashion. Each phase requires problem solving and critical thinking. More than adequacy of expression per se is required. Successful writers grasp the occasion, purpose, and audience for their work. They have learned how to juggle the expectations of diverse readers and the demands of distinct forms. Writing a letter or a persuasive editorial is not the same as fashioning a moving poem or a tightly reasoned legal brief.

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If writing is challenging, teaching it is all the more so. How do we create a classroom or school where increasingly complex writing tasks can be learned by all students? Teacher and researcher James Moffett described the new consensus about effective composition pedagogy this way: "Writing has to be learned in school very much the same way that it is practiced out of school. This means that the writer has a reason to write, an intended audience, and control of subject and form. It also means that composing is staged across various phases of rumination, investigation, consultation with others, drafting, feedback, revision, and perfecting."[2]

This understanding poses new challenges for educators as to how writing is presented and practiced in the classroom. Many of us can recall an English essay returned to us with marginal comments such as "This needs to be clearer" or "Weak opening" or "This paragraph is hard to follow." Often, no instruction or roadmap accompanied the comment showing how to take the next step. As students, we were just expected to fix these things and get them right the next time, as if writing well

required the same kind of knowledge as making a subject and verb agree or spelling a word correctly. But how do we make writing clear? Does everyone agree on what a strong opening looks like? What should we do to make our sentences flow in paragraphs that are easy to follow? If only these results could be drilled into us, then teaching writing would be easy.

Challenging as it is, educators interviewed for this publication argued that all students can learn to write and that writing is the most visible expression not only of what their students know but also of how well they have learned it. Those interviewed were teachers from all grade levels, elementary to postsecondary; language arts coordinators; composition program directors; principals; and superintendents. They underscored the critical role writing can play as a means for learning in most academic subjects. Some characterized writing as the most important academic skill students need to develop in their secondary and postsecondary education. All of them cited the hurdles schools and educators face in meeting students' writing needs.

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This chapter examines why improving writing is sometimes so challenging, for teacher and student alike. It identifies and explores some of the complexity that educators and policymakers should understand if they are to develop and sustain an effective writing program or curriculum. It addresses as well some of the myths and realities surrounding the teaching and learning of writing and suggests how administrators can assess how well writing is being taught in their schools.

HOW EDUCATORS SEE THE CHALLENGES OF TEACHING AND LEARNING WRITING

What does a school need to provide if its students are to master the complex set of skills and knowledge called writing? Educators interviewed for this book described

two kinds of challenge for improving the quality of writing in a school. The first addresses what students need in order to develop and improve as writers. The second reflects how teachers and administrators must support and sustain effective writing instruction.

Students Need to Write More in All Subjects

Learning to write requires frequent, supportive practice. Evidence shows that writing performance improves when a student writes often and across content areas. Writing also affects reading comprehension. According to a 1998 National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) Reading Report Card,[3] students in grades 4, 8, and 12 who said they wrote long answers weekly scored higher than those who said they never or hardly ever did so. Again in 2000, when only fourth-grade students were assessed, the NAEP Reading Report Card found a positive correlation between the frequency of writing long answers and higher reading achievement.[4] (The NAEP reports are discussed in more detail in Chapter Three.)

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Yet many American schools are not giving students much time to write. Sixty-nine percent of fourth-grade teachers report spending ninety minutes or less per week on writing activities, according to data collected for the NAEP 1998 Writing Assessment. Many of these activities require only a brief response rather than the longer ones NAEP assesses. The 2002 NAEP Writing Assessment did not survey classroom writing activities, but other national studies and assessments of writing over the past three decades have repeatedly shown that students spend too little time writing in and out of school. When a school focuses on improving writing, it often starts with a realistic assessment of how much and what kind of writing students are actually asked to do.

Students Have Diverse Abilities and Instructional Needs

Writing can be idiosyncratic, and this is reflected in how a student develops as a writer. At all grade levels, students show varying strengths and favor diverse forms

(narrative, persuasive, expository, and so on); their writing often progresses only in fits and starts. As Donald Murray, a Pulitzer Prize winner and professor emeritus of English at the University of New Hampshire, observes: "Most of us as writers have our strengths and our weaknesses. So do students. If you teach writing, you find people who are excellent spellers and understand the mechanics of grammar and don't say a thing. Others have voices. Some are very organized. Some are totally disorganized. I've taught first grade through graduate school. There's just an enormous range at every level."[5] For the teacher, the challenge is recognizing and then addressing the distinct instructional needs of diverse students.

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Students Must Master Diverse Writing Tasks to Develop Competence

A frequently stated goal of English language arts instruction is for the student to communicate competently and have the skills to participate in "varied literacy communities."[6] But what does competence in writing really mean? Across the grades, students write for varied purposes and audiences. Educators may have distinct notions of competence in asking students to perform increasingly complex writing tasks. In early literacy, children's writing develops from drawing, talking, developmental spelling, and picture stories. In middle and high school, students may regularly be asked

> Definitions of proficiency in writing vary widely from school to school and from teacher to teacher, with widest agreement at the lowest rung of the skills ladder, where correctness and basic readability are the concern, and the widest divergence at the upper rungs, where the stylistic preferences of teachers come into play. But even within the province of error, there are disagreements about the importance of different errors and about the number of errors an educated reader will tolerate without dismissing the writer as incompetent.
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> Mina Shaughnessy, *Errors and Expectations,* p. 276

to write a summary, a lab report, a book review, or test essays of varying length and level of difficulty. In college, they are challenged with yet more complex and extended writing tasks for which they may not have been adequately prepared. To meet this challenge, schools not only need to have students write more; they must also give students a rich and diverse array of writing experiences.

Students Face Ongoing Challenges in Learning to Write

"Few people," wrote Mina Shaughnessy, "even among the most accomplished of writers, can comfortably say they have finished learning to write. . . . Writing is something writers are always learning to do."[7] Working with so-called basic writers at the City College of New York, Shaughnessy was one of the first educators to draw attention to the logic of student writing errors and conflicting expectations about them in relation to mastering "school language." She observed that as student writers develop and are challenged with ever more difficult writing tasks, the number of mechanical errors and defects in their writing often increases. Spelling errors may give way to blunders in word choice, syntax, and rhetorical strategy. But errors of this kind can be misconstrued as regression rather than a sign of growth. Teachers, writes Mike Rose, should "analyze rather than simply criticize them. Error marks the place where education begins."[8] Writing is never learned once and for all, and the effective writing teacher offers students the kind of response that supports their growth as writers.

> We can no longer approach all writing with one set of criteria, assuming that one size fits all. It may be that, ultimately, we value some general qualities, such as "organization" or "quality of ideas." But we now know that the strategies that make good organization in a personal experience narrative may differ from the strategies that make a good report of information or a good persuasive letter. And we need to help students understand what those differences are, both by the way we teach and the way we evaluate their writing.
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> Charles Cooper and Lee Odell, *Evaluating Writing,* p. xiii

Teachers Need to Build Common Expectations for Good Writing

If teachers within the same school have distinct or unexamined expectations for good writing, it can be confusing to students and a source of misunderstanding

among faculty. Principals frequently cite teachers' varied assumptions about writing proficiency as a stumbling block for faculty in creating any schoolwide writing program. In the primary grades, where one teacher teaches all subjects, it may seem less of a hurdle, but the task of defining proficiency and making explicit expectations for good writing has to be addressed across all grade levels, content areas, and genres. As Crystal England, a former middle school principal, notes: "Only writing teachers are expected to teach writing across all subject areas. The science teachers may expect a well-researched, grammatically correct paper from new students, not realizing that for the six years before they got a particular child she never learned how to do that. So their whole perception of the child's writing and ability changes when they get those first works, and they blame the writing teachers, who, in turn, blame the earlier teachers. Every teacher who interacts with children has a responsibility for the student's development in writing as it applies to their subject area."[9]

Schools Need to Develop Fair and Authentic Writing Assessments

Student performance and growth in writing are difficult to measure not only because standards vary but also because a single-test assessment cannot show the range of a student's work or his or her development as a writer. Assessment of this kind may serve as a useful indicator of how well a school or district is doing with writing, but it is a limited instrument for diagnosing or evaluating a student's overall ability. Moreover, as recent studies[10] have shown, many state standards that point to key elements of strong writing are at variance with the rubrics or criteria used to assess it (see Chapter Five). As Grant Wiggins notes, "Many state writing assessments run the risk of undercutting good writing by scoring only for focus, organization, style, and mechanics without once asking judges to consider whether the writing is powerful, memorable, provocative, or moving (all impact-related criteria, and all at the heart of why people read what others write)."[11]

Educators Need Multiple Strategies for Teaching Writing

Because writing often involves complex thinking and problem solving, teachers need more than a set of fixed textbook procedures to teach it well and address the diverse needs of student writers. Historically, there has been tension between two distinct emphases in teaching composition: one that focuses on formal and external aspects of writing such as grammar, usage, sentence structure, and style; and another that focuses on meaning, ideas, expression, and writing processes. In most

> As school reform efforts are demonstrating, we must depend on reflective teachers as essential contributors to any national effort aimed at improving student achievement. Further, if schools are to become professional workplaces, writing will have to become integral to teachers' work and to their identities as professionals.
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> Sarah W. Freedman, Linda Flower, Glynda Hull, and John R. Hayes, "Ten Years of Research: Achievements of the National Center for the Study of Writing and Literacy," p. 8

classrooms today, teachers draw from both approaches.[12]

Effective writing teachers address more than content only and more than just skills. In the classroom, the challenge comes in understanding when to focus on which aspect of writing. Although research-proven strategies for effective teaching exist (such as those described in Chapters Three and Four), they are most successfully applied by a teacher who can recognize and analyze a variety of student writing difficulties. Teaching writing well involves multiple teaching strategies that address both process and product, both form and content.[13]

Schools Need to Offer Professional Development in Teaching Writing to All Faculty

Firsthand experience with the practice of writing can help a teacher recognize the kinds of problems students have in improving their writing. According to Donald Graves, a writing researcher and professor emeritus of education at the University of New Hampshire, teachers still receive little instruction in teaching writing. Elementary school teacher training focuses on reading methods, and only a handful of states require a course in writing pedagogy for certification. Writing can support learning in all disciplines, including science and math, but relatively few high school instructors in those content areas have been exposed to research-proven, effective strategies for using it. In many schools, English teachers have the main responsibility for teaching writing. But districts and schools that have made writing an overarching curricular aim have done so by declaring it the job of all faculty and by providing ongoing professional development focused on writing. A key element in such systemic change is finding a core group of teachers who write and are enthusiastic about teaching it.

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What the Public Has to Say About Writing

A 2005 survey for the National Writing Project reports that the public wants writing to be taught early and often in schools. The public research, conducted by Belden Russonello and Stewart, includes four focus groups of parents and teachers and a national survey of one thousand adults in the United States.[14] Highlights of the survey:

- For the American public, reading, math, and writing top the list of skills and subjects students should be required to master before high school graduation.
- Americans want writing to be taught at a young age and throughout many disciplines. All high school students should receive writing assignments, regardless of their college aspirations.
- Most Americans believe learning to write well will help students' performance in all subject areas as well as their performance on standardized tests, and ultimately improve career advancement.

In today's business world, writing is a "threshold skill" for both employment and promotion. In a 2004 survey of 120 major American corporations, respondents emphasized that people who cannot write and communicate clearly will not be hired and are unlikely to last long enough to be considered for promotion. The resulting report from the National Commission on Writing, "Writing: A Ticket to Work . . . Or a Ticket Out,"[15] makes clear that the demand for good writing in business is not limited to a handful of top executives. Two-thirds of salaried employees in large American companies have some writing responsibility, and they must

know what they are doing. "Writing skills are fundamental in business," said one respondent. "It's increasingly important to be able to convey content in a tight, logical, direct manner, particularly in a fast-paced technological environment."

EVERYONE CAN LEARN TO WRITE

Improving writing requires a sustained schoolwide effort. On the one hand, it is hard to imagine an ability that is more desirable in academia and in the professional world than writing; on the other hand, many people believe writing is an elite talent, something only creative or literary people know how to do. This mystique goes against the success that many writing teachers have experienced with their students. A more hopeful credo is suggested in Peter Elbow's *Everyone Can Write*:

- It is possible for anyone to produce a lot of writing with pleasure and satisfaction and without too much struggle.
- It is possible for anyone to figure out what he or she really means and finally get it clear on paper.
- It is possible for anyone to write things that others will want to read.
- Teachers can empower students, help them to like to write, and be more forceful and articulate in using writing in their lives.[16]

These assumptions guide the content of the chapters that follow.