



## So, How are My Colleagues in Minnesota Teaching Writing?

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Regardless of how much we know about writing instruction theories and practices, most of use still do not know the way our English teacher colleagues--across the hall or across the state--teach writing. This unanswered question was the impetus for this study. Since the results of the Minnesota Basic Skills Test, given to eighth-grade students across the state, came in with lower scores than most educators, parents, and taxpayers thought was acceptable, teachers and administrators have vowed they will do a better job.

However, it is difficult to do a *better* job until we are aware of our practices in any given subject area. Therefore, the purpose of this study was to describe the writing instruction practices of high school English teachers throughout Minnesota via reporting the results of a statewide survey.

First, this article discusses past studies on writing instruction practices and the methodology of this study. The results of the survey are organized and reported according to the subheadings in the survey: writing assignments and related activities, teaching techniques, reasons for writing, response to student writing, grading, and amount students write.

### Conclusions for Past Studies

Unfortunately, many of the survey-type studies in the past do not emphasize what English teachers actually *do* to move their students from *what* to write to *how* to write. But they do report other helpful facts on writing instruction practices. Since space does not permit reporting on every survey, only national surveys on writing instruction practices involving secondary teacher participants are included, in chronological order of their publication.

Applebee concludes that process writing instruction is failing for several reasons (Contexts 187-88). First, process writing is intended to be a "work-in-progress," and classroom writing is usually evaluative. Second, process writing instruction takes more time, which teachers do not feel they have; as a result, teachers adopt a less time-consuming practice and title it *process writing*. Third, teachers lack expertise in process instruction. Fourth, process writing seeks answers during writing, while most schools want developed answers recorded in assignments; the process of seeking answers during writing complicates using writing for evaluative purposes. Fifth, when implemented, attempts at

process writing usually became a skill and drill exercise, rather than a focus on contextualizing writing and its purpose.

Focusing primarily on response to student writing, Freedman reports numerous findings on both responses to students' writing and on various other classroom writing instruction practices, both of which are reported here. Freedman states that secondary teachers were using specific types of response to student writing in a continuum moving from the practices used the most frequently to the practices used least frequently. These practices include 1) discussing the topic or subject of a text with the student, 2) commenting on strengths and weaknesses in student writing, 3) responding to selected problems in student writing, and 4) making students aware of an audience for their writing. Those responses which were used somewhat less frequently fall into the second group, also listed in order of frequency. These practices included 5) using student writing examples as models, 6) editing in peer groups, 7) publishing student work, and 8) meeting for individual student conferences. Modeling work of professional writers was the least-used practice (71-3).

Freedman concludes that even though some teachers spent four weeks navigating students through a writing assignment (topic selection to final draft), the average time given to a writing assignment was 5.21 days (27). In suburban and academically rigorous private schools, academic writing began at 9th grade. For the inner city and non-college bound students in the suburbs, academic writing (essays with a clear thesis which is proven by the support of the body paragraphs) was not taught (36-

7). Finally, Freedman concludes that although teachers in the survey found multiple reasons for teaching writing, the dominate view was to help students learn to think more clearly, not master the mechanics of writing.

In group writing instruction, however, Freedman notes that many teachers "conceptualize teaching the writing process as teaching a rather formulaic set procedures--prewriting, writing, and revising" and frequently ignore the problem-solving process in writing (58). Freedman concludes that writing instruction and response to student writing should help students learn problem-solving strategies within for writing rather than a set of procedures.

The National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) test has been repeated every four years since 1972 (Applebee, Langer, and Mullis 5). Although the earlier NAEP reports lack the breadth on writing instruction and feedback that appears in the more recent NAEP reports, they do include some specific practices. With revision, for example, in 1974, 54% of the students reported that they wrote multiple drafts; in 1984, only 59% of the students reported writing multiple drafts. In 1974, approximately half of the students were prewriting (41% of 13 year olds and 55% of 17 year olds); in 1984, prewriting increased to 47% for 13 year olds and 65% of 17 year olds (Applebee, Langer, and Mullis 56-7).

Regarding feedback, in 1974 approximately one-third of students reported receiving teacher feedback on "how to improve their papers," whereas by 1984 approximately one-half of students reported receiving teacher feedback (Applebee, Langer, and Mullis

56). This NAEP study concludes that students were receiving more writing instruction in 1984 than in 1974, and that teachers were giving more attention to prewriting and rewriting activities in 1984 than in 1974 (Applebee, Langer, and Mullis 59).

The NAEP study done in 1988 (Applebee, Langer, and Mullis, 1990) reported little change from the previous study in writing quality and writing instruction. These changes do show, however, that students in 4th, 8th, and 11th grades were writing more in 1974 as well as 1984; that teachers are commenting on fewer student texts, but commenting on them in more depth when they do; that writing quality is about the same or slightly better for 4th, 8th and 11th grades; and that students appear to have an increasingly positive attitude toward writing (73). They concluded that the only major change was that students are required to write more frequently and longer texts (Applebee, Langer, and Mullis 6; Jenkins 73-74). However, the 1988 NAEP study primarily report on the quality of student writing rather than writing instruction practices.

The most recent NAEP study reported, 1992, describes some specific writing instruction practices including classroom strategies and response to student work (Applebee, Langer, Mullis, Latham, and Gentile). Among the specific activities which the survey teachers reported emphasizing the most, 76% reported that they always required planning; 61% reported that they always required multiple drafts; and 45% reported that they always required students to define audience and purpose in their writing. Additionally, only 10%

reported that they always require a formal outline (174-6).

Regarding student response to writing, approximately 30% of the teachers reported using peer groups for writing instruction once or twice a week and approximately 60% reported using peer groups for writing instruction once a month (Applebee, Langer, Mullis, Latham, and Gentile 184). In addition, 47% reported that they discussed "works in progress" with students as they wrote. When grading, 91% of the teachers reported that quality of ideas were the main plumb lines for grading (190-2). The results of the most recent NAEP study indicate that teachers are applying more practices from the process writing cluster than in the past.

Although English teachers will never become clones who teach writing identically, the surveys do illustrate trends in writing practices. The key point gleaned from reviewing these five surveys is that they suggest that writing instruction is changing. Students are writing more in the 1990s than in the 1970s and 1980s. In the 1990s, teachers nation-wide report that they require students to plan their writing, to seek/receive feedback, then to revise their writing. Teachers also report that they emphasize writing as communicating a specific message to an audience rather than as handing in a formula-driven essay. In the 1990s, teachers nation-wide report that they emphasize quality of ideas and their development as students write rather than use writing to communicate preconceived ideas. In comparison to these past studies, most of which were published in the 1980s, this study illustrates many of the mid-1990s

writing instruction practices reported by teachers state-wide in Minnesota.

### Methodology

The survey participants sampled were 10th-grade English teachers in Minnesota. All the participants had experience, and most had credits beyond the bachelors degree; the teachers in the public schools generally had more experience and advanced degrees than the teachers in private schools. Only 36.5% of the survey participants reports that they had either taken a class or attended a conference on writing instruction within the past five years.

### Materials

The materials consisted of a survey mailed to a stratified random sampling of 10th-grade English teachers in Minnesota (reproduced at the end of this article). The survey obtained its validity and reliability from three sources: it was based on two other valid writing instruction surveys, Applebee (1981) and Freedman (1987); it addressed the question guiding this study--*How are high school English teachers teaching writing in Minnesota?*; and it went through a pilot study.

### Procedures

First, the Minnesota Department of Education provided a list of Minnesota high schools for a sample population. The schools were classified into four categories: suburban, private, urban, and rural. Second, the schools were randomly selected using a table of random numbers. Third, a pre-screen phone call was made to a principal in the schools selected for the state-wide survey. The principal was asked to

suggest one 10th-grade English teacher, who met specific criteria, as a possible participant in the survey. Fourth, for 130 of the 475 high schools in Minnesota, a personalized cover letter and a coded survey were mailed to the English teacher suggested by the school principal. Over the next two months, 94 surveys were returned, which was a 72% rate of return. Fifth, survey data were analyzed according to percentages for the entire group of survey participants.

### Results

The following sections of this article include writing assignments and related activities, reasons for writing, response to student writing, grading, amount students write, and conclusion, based directly upon the survey.

#### Writing Assignments and Related Activities

Among survey participants, 83% reported that they *Almost Always* or *Often* used the essay structure. This response seems to indicate that essays are a basic writing assignment for almost all 10th-grade English teachers. The survey participants also reported using a wide variance in usage of journals, from *Almost Always* to *Almost Never* used, although the teachers at the urban schools reported that they *Almost Always* used journals twice as frequently as teachers in any other school setting. The use of journals appears to be an individual choice of about half of the survey participants, and is unrelated to setting. Teachers appear to use the journals either constantly or rarely.

Among survey participants, 75% reported that they *Almost Never* or *Sometimes* used collaborative writing, and 2% reported that they *Almost Always*

used collaborative writing. This indicates that teachers rarely, if ever, assigned collaborative writing.

Thirty-seven percent of the teachers reported that they *Often* and 30% reported that they *Sometimes* gave students an open topic for writing assignments, and 40% reported that they *Often* and 37% reported that they *Sometimes* allowed students to write about subjects other than English. This response indicates that teachers usually give students a writing topic and that those topics are usually about English or the literature that students are reading. Allowing students to find a topic which interests them for their writing appears to be the exception rather than the rule.

#### Teaching Techniques

Although 43% of the survey participants reported that they *Often* asked students to write to a specific audience, only 16% reported that they *Almost Always* asked students to write to a specific audience. Attention to audience dropped even lower when the audience was specified. For example, among the survey participants, 34% *Almost Never* asked their students to write to their class as an audience, and only 6% reported that they *Almost Always* asked their students to write to their class. In addition, 53% reported that they *Almost Never* asked students to write to an audience outside the class, and only 3% *Almost Always* asked students to write to an outside audience.

Attention to audience appears to be ignored among the Minnesota teachers surveyed. Almost all of the survey respondents reported that, in general, they did not teach audience to their students. Among specifically cited audiences, such as the class or people

outside of the class, even fewer teachers reported that they taught audience to their students. The survey does not, however, address whether students did, in fact, write for a given audience. Additionally, 63% of the survey respondents reported that they did not use a textbook to teach writing.

Among survey participants, 37% reported that they *Often* and 31% reported that they *Almost Always* required their students to write multiple drafts. This figure indicates that revision is not a prominent practice, since slightly more than one-third of the survey participants reported that students usually wrote multiple drafts of their work, and slightly less than one-third reported that students frequently wrote multiple drafts.

Modeling is a fairly common writing instruction practice among Minnesota English teachers, especially teacher modeling. Among survey participants, 39% reported that they *Often* and 31% report that they *Sometimes* used student modeling. On the other hand, 72% reported that they *Almost Always* or *Often* used teacher modeling. Unfortunately, the survey responses cannot determine whether teachers perceived that they used modeling daily or once per assignment when they reported using it.

#### Reasons for Writing

Seventy-six percent of the survey respondents reported that teaching students to think was a *Very Important* reason for writing, and 22% reported that it was an *Important Reason* for writing. It appears that almost all of the survey participants believe that teaching students to think is a key goal of writing.

Of the other reasons for teaching

students to write, 57% of the respondents reported that learning to communicate clearly was a *Very Important Reason* (57%) or an *Important Reason* (38%) for students to write. Teaching the essay structure was an *Important* reason for 53% of the teachers, and *Very Important* for 37%, indicating that this is probably a common practice. Additionally, 48% of the respondents reported that teaching mechanical correctness was an *Important Reason* and 40% reported that it was a *Very Important Reason*.

#### *Response to Student Writing*

At the rough draft stage, the data indicate that students are receiving some feedback from either their teacher or their peers (or both), but that the feedback is not a widespread practice. Among the survey participants, students received feedback at the rough draft stage in a teacher conference *Almost Always* (13%), *Often* (32%), *Sometimes* (42%), and *Almost Never* (12%). Forty-two percent of teachers also used peer feedback *Sometimes*, while 32% reported using peers *Often*. The survey results also showed that 68% of the teachers *Almost Always* and 28% *Often* gave students feedback with the final draft. This indicates that students received considerable, if not the most feedback from their teachers with the graded draft, which is probably the final product.

Survey participants' replies to the statements about responding to a few problems in a text and/or responding to all the problems in a text were not strong enough to suggest that these two types of responding were mutually exclusive or that one method was used more than the other. It appeared to be an individual choice, although the teacher participants

at the private school responded to all the problems in students' texts more frequently than those in other settings.

Among survey participants, 60% reported that they *Almost Always* or *Often* gave peer feedback prior to a rough draft. In addition, 47% reported that they *Often* and 38% reported that they *Sometimes* gave teacher feedback prior to a rough draft. This indicates that feedback prior to a rough draft occurs with some frequency, but is not a widespread practice with Minnesota teachers.

#### *Grading*

Sixty-seven percent of the survey participants indicated that they *Almost Always* and 31% that they *Often* assessed student writing. Despite these differences, 98% of the survey participants reported that they *Almost Always* or *Often* assessed student writing. Additionally, 63% reported that they *Almost Never* or *Sometimes* used peer assessment, but 30% reported that they *Often* used peer assessment. This indicates that teachers are the primary grader of almost all student writing and that the survey participants rarely use peer assessment.

In the use of holistic grading, survey results indicated that 32% of teachers *Often*, 25% *Almost Always*, 24% *Sometimes*, and 17% *Almost Never* used holistic grading. Use of a grading criteria sheet was reported as *Often* by 30% of the participants, *Almost Always* by 29%, *Sometimes* by 25%, and *Almost Never* by 16%.

The data indicate that these two assessment practices were not mutually exclusive; some teachers reported that they *Almost Always* used both a holistic form of grading and a grading sheet with

specific criteria. Furthermore, the frequency of both practices is fairly evenly distributed. Forty percent of participants reported that they *Almost Never* and 26% reported that they *Sometimes* use portfolios.

#### *Amount Students Write*

Assignments of 250-500 words appear to be used by almost all the survey respondents. Seventy-nine percent reported that they either assigned papers of 250-500 words, or that the length of writing assignments varied too widely to define an average length. To complete most writing assignments, 4% of the survey participants reported that they gave students one day, 19% gave students one to three days, 48% gave students three days to one week, 20% gave students two weeks, and 8% gave students more than two weeks. This data indicates that most teachers gave students approximately one week to complete most writing assignments.

#### *Conclusion*

On the open-ended question, all teachers titled their writing instruction as the *writing process*, even though the term was intentionally deleted from the survey. The remainder of the survey divided various writing instruction practices into various subcategories and reported the prominence of use within those categories.

For writing and related activities, essays were reportedly assigned by almost all the teachers, collaborative writing was assigned by almost none of the teachers, and although an open topic choice and writing about subjects other than English were related to school setting, most teachers gave students a choice of topics rather than open topics.

For teaching techniques, most teachers (two-thirds) reported that they did not use a textbook to teach writing; they did not teach audience; they did not consistently require multiple drafts; but they did use both student models and teacher models, especially the latter, in their writing instruction practices.

Reasons for writing reported by almost all the teachers included that it was very important to teach students to think and to communicate clearly. And, although many teachers report that teaching students the essay structure and/or mechanical correctness was important, it appeared to be much less important than the issue of clear thinking and communication.

For response to student writing, almost all the teachers reported giving feedback on the final graded draft and marking mechanical errors on student texts. Some teachers reported giving feedback prior to the rough draft. Survey participants reported mixed answers for marking all the problems or a few problems in a student text--both are being used. Finally, a few teachers reported giving feedback prior to the rough draft or using student/teacher conferences or peer conferences after the rough draft.

Almost all of the teachers reported that they grade their students' writing, while almost none reported that students grade their peers' writing or that portfolios are used. Also, holistic and criteria grading both are reportedly used; frequently, both are used by the same teacher. Almost all teachers used writing assignments that were usually 250-500 words in length and that the time frame to complete them was one week.

Many of the writing instructional practices discussed in this survey are not addressed in the the national surveys reviewed earlier. However, it seems relevant to make comparisons between this Minnesota survey on writing instruction practices and national surveys on writing instruction practices, when possible. Minnesota teachers appear to mirror their colleagues nationally in that they require their students to write frequently and a primary objective in writing instruction is to communicate their text clearly and to teach students to think/problem solve as they compose a text. Minnesota teachers differ from their colleagues nationally in that they place less emphasis on many key writing instruction practices: audience, purpose, peer conferences, and multiple drafts, as well as giving verbal feedback during the writing process, and feedback prior to the final draft. Finally, Applebee's conclusion in the early 1980s that the writing process was not and will never work does not seem to be true in the 1990s. It appears that nationally, and to a lesser degree in Minnesota, teachers are adopting more strategies that exist in the cluster of writing instruction practices typically labeled as the *writing process*.

For both teachers and students, learning is a journey through which we guide our students. In Minnesota, the Basic Skills Test given last spring reported the current destination or stop-off point for Minnesota 8th graders in reading and math. The purpose of this article is to describe the path(s) we as

English teachers in Minnesota are choosing to transport our students to a successful destination in their writing.

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## Minnesota Survey on the Teaching of Writing

As you fill out this questionnaire, please base you responses on one, average ability tenth grade class which you are teaching this year. If you are not teaching 10th grade, please do not use a class whose curriculum is almost exclusively writing (i.e. creative writing, journalism, etc.) If possible, please use a regular English class (i.e. English 9, English 11, etc.)

Number of students in this average ability 10th grade class is\_\_\_\_\_.

### I. Writing Assignments and Related Activities

Please answer this section according to the extent that you currently use the following activities with this class for tests, class work, homework, or other writing assignments throughout the school year.

	Almost Never <u>Used</u>	Sometimes <u>Used</u>	Often <u>Used</u>	Almost Always <u>Used</u>
Journals	1	2	3	4
Collaborative writing assignments	1	2	3	4
Computer exchanges (like E-mail)	1	2	3	4
Writing about subjects other than				
English for English class	1	2	3	4
Narratives (non-fiction)	1	2	3	4
Narratives (fiction)	1	2	3	4
Research paper				
--Library gathered	1	2	3	4
--Field-based gathered data				
(interviews, observations, etc.)	1	2	3	4
Essay structure	1	2	3	4

### II. Teaching Techniques

To what extent do you currently use the following teaching techniques for this class?

	Almost Never <u>Used</u>	Sometimes <u>Used</u>	Often <u>Used</u>	Almost Always <u>Used</u>
Use an assignment sheet	1	2	3	4
Have students write in class	1	2	3	4
Break assignments into steps that				
can be completed one at a time	1	2	3	4
Allow open choice for writing topics				
within other assignment limits				
(length, genre, etc.)	1	2	3	4
Publish student writing for class members	1	2	3	4
Publish student writing for audience				



outside the class	1	2	3	4
Require multiple drafts, so you can make suggestions on early ones	1	2	3	4
Model a writing strategy in class	1	2	3	4
Use student work for a class model or an exercise	1	2	3	4
Direct Instruction	1	2	3	4
Read essays to illustrate writing techniques	1	2	3	4
Require students to write to a specific audience	1	2	3	4
Introduce a topic for large or small group discussion before students write on it	1	2	3	4
Peer response strategies	1	2	3	4
Self-Assessment strategies	1	2	3	4

Do you use a textbook to teach writing? \_\_\_\_\_yes \_\_\_\_\_no

If you use a textbook, please list the titles and publishers of al the writing textbook(s) you use for this class.

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### III. Reasons for Writing

Below are a list of reasons for which teachers ask students to write. Please circle the numbers which best describes how important you think this writing activity is in you tenth-grade class.

	Not at all Important	Important	Not Very Important	Very Important
To give students practice in aspects of writing mechanics (grammar, punctuation, etc.)	1	2	3	4
To test whether students learned relevant content	1	2	3	4
To summarize material learned in class	1	2	3	4
To let students use writing as a tool to think through an idea, topic, concept, etc.	1	2	3	4
To teach students the essay structure	1	2	3	4
To grade students' ability to communicate clearly	1	2	3	4
To help students develop their voice in writing	1	2	3	4
To give students opportunities to express feelings	1	2	3	4
To help students remember important information	1	2	3	4
To give students opportunities to correlate personal experiences with a given topic	1	2	3	4

### IV. Responses to student writing

What methods do you currently use to give students feedback on their writing?

	Almost Never Used	Sometimes Used	Often Used	Almost Always Used
<b>Early Feedback</b>				
Peer conferences (response groups)	1	2	3	4
Parents (encouraged, not required)	1	2	3	4
Student/teacher conference	1	2	3	4
Written feedback	1	2	3	4
<b>Completed Draft Feedback</b>				
Peer conference (response groups)	1	2	3	4
Parents	1	2	3	4
Student/Teacher conference	1	2	3	4
Teacher, feedback when assigning final grade	1	2	3	4
<b>Types of Feedback</b>				
Response to only a few selected problems in the text	1	2	3	4
Respond to all the problems in the text	1	2	3	4
Reader-based Feedback (responding as a reader, not evaluator to the text)	1	2	3	4
Text-based feedback (responding primarily to the text, independent of context)	1	2	3	4
Indicate mechanical errors	1	2	3	4

### V. Grading

To what extent do you currently use the following grading measurements--formally or informally--with this class?

	Almost Never Used	Sometimes Used	Often Used	Almost Always Used
<b>Assessor</b>				
Teacher assessment	1	2	3	4
Peer assessment	1	2	3	4
Self (Student) assessment	1	2	3	4
<b>Types of Assessment</b>				
Holistic Scoring				
Portfolio Assessment	1	2	3	4
Achievement not determined by grades ( )	1	2	3	4
Grading Sheet with listed criteria	1	2	3	4
Pass/Fail	1	2	3	4

### VI. Amount Students Write

A. Please circle the answer which best describes the average amount that students in you tenth-grade class write each week.

1 page or less    1-2 pages    2-3 pages    3-4 pages    5 pages or more

B. Please circle the answer which best describes the average amount of time that students in your tenth-grade class write each week.

1 hour or less    1-2 hours    2-3 hours    3-4 hours    5 hours or more

C. Please circle the answer which best describes the average length of the writing assignments you give. If the length varies widely, please circle the last answer.

less than 250 words      250-500 words      500-1000 words  
more than 1000 words      length varies considerably

D. Please circle the answer which best describes the average amount of time you usually give students to complete most writing assignments from introducing the assignment to the final draft. If the amount of time given varies widely, please circle the last answer.

1 day      1-3 days      3 days-1 week      1-2 weeks      2 weeks or longer

VII. Open-ended question

What are your beliefs about teaching writing? How would you advise someone else to teach writing?

Number of years you have taught English\_\_\_\_\_

Highest degree earned\_\_\_\_\_

Highest degree sought (if applicable)\_\_\_\_\_

Hours earned beyond highest degree\_\_\_\_\_

Please list any classes or conferences you've attended during the past five years on the teaching of writing.

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