

## Writing the Write Way Dr. Gerald Tindal – BRT.UO

### Introduction

In this blog-guide, we address the three critical and sequential steps in teaching and assessing writing. Of course, we could have been more granular and expanded the process to far more specific steps but have kept the process to three with further articulation reserved for other blogs. We consider the first step as critical, without which, teaching and learning is likely to become jumbled: Decide on the discourse type as the structural guide that dictates all further steps. This discourse defines the content and structure of your writing prompts. After that, these further steps can be invoked uniformly (writing as a process and providing feedback and reporting results). These three basic components of writing instruction and assessment are critical for students to improve their writing by writing. Later, with more proficient writing, discourse types can be mixed and matched, but it is wise to master each type first.

WriteRightNow–WRN (<https://writerightnow.com>) is uniquely positioned to allow all three steps to be invoked seamlessly. WRN is a platform designed to support writing instruction and assessment. It offers various features and tools that can help teachers in teaching and evaluating student writing. Following is overview of WriteRightNow and how teachers can use it.

- *Develop Discourse Specific Writing Prompts:* WRN assists teachers in developing prompts for writing assignments that represent any of three types of discourse. The software helps in creating prompts that provide sufficient information for students to understand the context and problem space. WRN offers a library of prompts to use as starters that can be adjusted and embellished as well as an option for teachers to join in a group of colleagues who can share their prompts. The software also allows teachers to provide scaffolds for students to assist them in structuring their responses, ensuring coherence and organization.
- *Deploy the Writing Process.* WRN provides guidance and support throughout the writing process. It offers strategies and resources for prewriting, drafting, revising, editing, and publishing. Teachers can utilize these resources to introduce students to each stage of the writing process and provide them with specific techniques and tools to enhance their writing skills. WRN also includes a feedback library that allows teachers to provide timely and personalized feedback to students. The library consists of pre-written comments and suggestions for common writing challenges. Teachers can easily select and customize these comments to address specific areas of improvement, such as organization, transitions, or paragraph structure. This feature saves time for teachers while providing valuable feedback to students.
- *Report Results:* WRN incorporates evaluation and scoring tools for assessing student writing. It offers quantitative and qualitative outcomes for measuring productivity and quality. Teachers can use these outcomes to assess student progress and identify areas for improvement. The platform provides scoring rubrics and scales for evaluating different dimensions of writing, such as content, organization, voice, language fluency, and conventions. These evaluation tools promote consistency and transparency in grading. These results are conveyed through data visualization features that help teachers track and analyze student performance. It presents student progress through tables and charts, allowing teachers to observe individual growth across prompts and essays.

In conclusion, students *learn writing by writing*: This data-driven system in WRN facilitates goal-setting discussions with students and help teachers identify trends and patterns in student writing that supports targeted instruction and intervention. In summary, teachers can use WriteRightNow as a comprehensive tool for teaching writing skills, providing feedback, evaluating student work, and monitoring progress. It streamlines the writing process, offers valuable resources, and enables efficient and effective assessment practices. By leveraging the platform's features, teachers can support student growth and foster a writing-rich learning environment.

### Step 1. Develop Discourse Specific Prompts

We rely on the *National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP)* as the most authoritative source for writing assessment and have adopted their structure of writing discourse. In the table below, we list the terms used in the NAEP frameworks (and our translation of them in parentheses) in the left column and then the main features of each discourse in the right column.

Writing Discourse Type	Main Features
To Convey Experience (Narrative with story grammar)	Settings, characters, events, plot, and resolution
To Persuade (Persuasive/Argumentative)	Sales-choices, Politics-voting
To Explain (Exposition with facts/concepts/principles)	Content Subjects with intellectual operations

Narrative writing is the most common form of writing discourse taught and practiced in our schools. This type of writing typically has five story grammar elements, features that not only define the content but also inherently impose a structure.

- All stories take place somewhere and somewhen, which can be described in terms of the setting. Descriptions of settings can be sparse or elaborate in terms of location and place; they also may be situated in time, which would then be controlled by the verb tense).
- Most narrative stories have characters, individuals who may serve as the ‘teller’ of the story (in the first person) or those who appear throughout the story with the content delivered by them (use of second and third person).
- Stories need events to happen, which may occur (interact) with characters and settings). Events can be brief or long term (and sequential).
- A plot is best used to organize a big idea behind the story (and typically defines the purpose of the story). A plot is often an implicit feature that ‘explains’ what characters are present and what they are doing (what events are happening).
- Finally, stories come to an end with a resolution, which can be developed slowly over the course of the story or quickly with suddenness.

Persuasive / argumentative is a particular discourse that often has a focused point of view, a perspective that is used to centralized and control the content. The structure of this discourse is best conveyed with explicit writing that is clearly defined and supported with varying kinds of information, some which may be factual and some which may be considered more as endorsements. Persuasive/argumentative writing results in judgements that conclusive. With persuasive writing, the focus is adoption and acceptance; argumentative writing results in sides being taken with claims, warrants, and evidence.

Television is probably the most ubiquitous media for delivering persuasive writing (the story board behind the message which is then complemented by multi-media events like presentations of people and images of settings). The message is simply “if you buy this \_\_\_” you too will look better, be healthier, have more joy in your life, and simply be better off. Television also is the medium of choice for politics in which people running for office espouse certain points of view either on an issue and/or against their opponents. The message is that “if you vote for me, problems will be solved...”. Another arena in which argumentative writing is expressed is in the court of law, in which pros and cons are expressed by prosecutors and defendants, respectively. In this environment, the discourse is used to parade a sequence of events in such a way that a decision can be rendered by a judge or jury, often with serious consequences (in terms of time or money). An important aside: Although persuasive writing may broadly be based on colorful language and emotional appeals based on associations (e.g., noteworthy people who endorse something or positive outcomes from its purchase or use), argumentative writing is based on deductive or inductive logic (often using Toulmin’s model with claims, warrants, and evidence).

Finally, expository writing is informational at its heart in which the objective to describe, explain, and inform so the reader learns new information. Typical examples include subject matter content classes in high school: sciences (of various types, like biology, chemistry, etc.) or social sciences (psychology, sociology, etc.). In this discourse, writing involves exposition of facts, concepts, and principles. Facts are one-to-one statements (whether true or not); concepts are broad words that include a range of examples and non-examples; principles are if-then associations or cause-effect. An example of these latter two content forms would be the water cycle, where different states of water include several different forms, each a concept (liquid, solid, gas) that can be further explicated. Liquid can come in the form of rain and exists in rivers, lakes, streams, etc.; water in the form of gas can be steam, vapor, humidity, etc.; solid forms of water would be ice or snow. When other concepts like temperature and pressure are considered, principles can be framed that depict the water cycle. In the sciences, concepts and principles are the bedrock of codified information. In the social sciences, concepts and principles are generally supported postulates with information organized that is more relational (reflecting cause-effect).

Another dimension of expository writing is the way information can be used through intellectual operations (IOs) to solve problems. Rather than refer to Bloom’s taxonomy made famous in the 1950s, we suggest categorizing IOs with such terms as summarize, illustrate (exemplify), evaluate (make judgments), elaborate (extend inferences), predict (outcomes), and explain (justify outcomes). These terms can be operationally defined in a clearer manner than other taxonomies.

Prompt development can proceed in a more clear and straightforward manner once the discourse type is identified. Think of the prompt with three important components. First, sufficient information needs to be presented so students can understand the context for responding, the problem space for ensuring their response is appropriate, and have a ‘running jump’ into beginning their writing and expanding into a coherent essay. Second, some assistance in structuring their response allows students to approach the writing task in an organized manner, paying attention to development and sequence of information. Finally, some sense of evaluation would be helpful so students can self-regulate and know both when they are done and finalize their response into a unified response.

Prompts often need additional support that students can use as scaffolds to not only jump start their writing but also provide structural supports to use in all major drafts of their writing. These scaffolds may be concept maps, timelines and chronological summaries, highlights, cliff notes, videos, primary source materials, etc. Because a prompt needs to be concise and succinct in focusing students, these supplemental scaffolds can simply be referenced in the prompt, with students directed how to use them.

## Step 2. Deploy the Writing Process

Using the *National Writing Project* and the *What Works Clearinghouse*, we address the actual writing process as both iterative and formative. We have simplified the process into three basic phases, although many more can be deployed (particularly if the writing results in a high stakes decision like publication or acceptance of awards, in which case editing becomes much more important).

Phase	Main Strategy
Sloppy copy	Free writing
Initial (re)assembled draft	Cutting and pasting with track changes
Final draft with structure	Highlight opening paragraphs with transitions

Initially, writing should proceed uninhibited and simply get ideas down (metaphorically on paper though this medium is best reserved for personal letters, not classroom essays). Free writing is a strategy that is free of editing and correcting, but is simply production oriented: The more, the better. Several different strategies can be used to be productive:

- As different ideas are generated, they can be separated with blank lines.
- Ideas can also be generated in an outline form with nested topics.
- A concept map can be used to highlight relations among different ideas.
- Sentence stems can be used to start ideas but not use complete sentences

Ideally, this initial phase of writing can be completed quickly, in as little as 15 minutes. Revised drafts can be developed but the main point is to generate not polish.

In a revision, the focus is on the structure of writing, in which information is presented sequentially and with paragraphs (that use topic sentences and transition words/phrases). In this phase, the revisions begin to shape the whole and present a beginning, a middle section, and an ending. Emphasis should be given to big ideas and the overall shape of the essay. Although the sequence (of sentences both across and within paragraphs) may be rough, at least the essay has a defined shape with appropriate attention to the three main sections. In WRN, a feedback library is available to ‘drag and drop’ given that many comments are likely to be similar. For example, often students have difficult sequencing an essay so comments can provide students positive comments on that; transitions are a troubling are for many students, which is a more specific linguistic structure that reflects sequencing; finally, paragraph structure is a perennial problem with students, particularly in framing a topic sentence.

In completing a final draft, emphasis turns to specific words (or transitions) to highlight language conventions. Stylistic devices can be considered to provide unique and personal perspectives. In this phase, editing is critical in all its forms of conventions, spelling, punctuation, grammar, and

style. One of the first judgments made by readers is in response to the care taken by the writer that everything is proper. This is when ‘track changes’ is often invoked in MS Word. The problem with this software is that it is one-on-one. WRN allows this to be embedded in the feedback library and the activation of the spelling-grammar checker.

It is ideal to use the writing process (and feedback) in understanding what to target for individual students and how to determine the effectiveness of various feedback strategies. Ideally, teachers can keep a portfolio of successive drafts that can be reviewed intermittently throughout the quarter or the year. Students can be used as peer-editors in providing both feedback and in self-reflections of the drafts. In either case, it is important to instantiate the writing process and all phases by asking several questions:

The first draft is simply a down payment (though watch out for a balloon payment soon after). Students should be encouraged to simply produce with the idea that some content may be pitched out and new content may be entered in.

- How many ideas are thrown down in the initial draft?
- How connected are they?
- How well do they serve as a springboard for further articulation?
- How easily connected can they become in the second draft?

For the second draft, which likely represents a roughly cut essay, teachers should see nascent content, organization, and coherence. The main structure is present, though it may be ragged, with slightly or ill-formed paragraphs, awkward transitions, and ill-defined end pieces (a proper beginning and ending). This is the draft that can be used to focus on language by asking such questions as...

- Has the student set up the reader appropriately to guess what’s coming at the end?
- Have ideas been strung along with both sufficient uniqueness (to avoid being dull) but not so fast that the reader is run over?
- Is the essay coherent and stand alone?
- Does the introduction and conclusion serve as book ends?
- Are the parts in the whole and the whole in the parts?

Finally, comes the last draft: A finely polished response that respects the reader with traditional conventions of language. An essay that is sloppy, with many spelling errors, unconventional grammar, and poor style, is likely to be judged poorly, with the reader asking: Why bother to read this, given the writer is not respecting my time to read the essay. Here, the questions are obvious:

- Are words spelled correctly (and watch out for homonyms)?
- Are the language conventions correct?
- Is the essay properly punctuated (etc., capitals, commas, periods, semi-colons)?
- Is the voice direct with clear active sentences?

### Step 3. Report Results

We base our view of outcomes on the perspectives of *Joe Bunting*, an author and leader of *The Write Practice* community and (*How to Become a Better Writer Faster*) and Bruce Flow from *The Writing Cooperative*.

Outcome	Examples
Quantitative	Words, unique words, key concepts, spelling, etc.
Qualitative	Scoring rubrics with dimensions and anchors

Quantitative outcomes represent more granular aspects of writing: Productivity in writing words, unique words, and sentences. For many students, production is (and should be the goal). It is difficult to get better without more, particularly for students who are low achievers, with a disability, or from a second language. For these students, production should be the goal as it is difficult to favorably evaluate an essay that is short. A famous phrase is “if you want me to write something quickly, I’ll give it to you tomorrow. If you want me to write something succinctly, it’ll take a month”. Students need to be empowered to produce with an emphasis on quantity. Then, once text is written, it can be shaped, particularly in this digital age when cutting and pasting can be done in a heartbeat.

Furthermore, improvement is more obvious with quantitative outcomes. The sheer scale is more incremental. As we note with the qualitative scales, the number of discrete values is far more granular (perhaps ranging from 1 to 100) versus a qualitative scale (that ranges from 1 to 5).

Qualitative scales provide important validation to quantitative scales, with an emphasis on the whole essay.

- A holistic scale can be used to display the overall quality in a single value.
- An analytic scale can be used, with many different dimensions identified/emphasized like ideas and content, organization, voice, language fluency, and conventions.

Irrespective of the type of scale, they place the parts (of the essay) into the whole. They also are traditionally used in most state-wide writing program. In WRN, two types of holistic scales are presented: (a) one that directly quality (beginning, emerging, developing, proficient, strong, and exemplary), or (b) letter grade (F-failure, D-poor, C-Satisfactory, B-Good, and A-Excellent). For the analytic scales, which break down writing to various features, three types of discourse are presented (a) narrative (convey experience), persuasive (argumentative), and informative (explain).

The choice of outcomes need not be an either-or decision. In fact, in WRN, both charts and tables are used so teachers can focus their instruction on the needs of individual students. For many low performers, production is the major stumbling block: They simply need to produce more (words (or unique words) in general or words reflecting proper grammar and syntax. For these students, a qualitative scale may be insensitive (e.g., they would always receive a low score of 0 or 1 on all the analytic traits because of insufficient content that conveys their ideas). On the other hand, middle and high performing students may have written sufficient content so they can be evaluated by the confluence of various analytic traits. For example, teachers can focus on

ideas and content in association with organization and sentence fluency, to work on paragraph structure and transitions.

To be useful, results need to be smart in their display, so the outcomes are immediately and visually discernible. One of the most famous writers on visual displays of data is Edward Tufte. <https://sphweb.bumc.bu.edu/otlt/mph-modules/bs/datapresentation/DataPresentation3.html> In this website, he lists the following elements of graphical excellence (which are quoted below)<sup>1</sup>.

- Show the data.
- Induce the viewer to think about the substance of the findings rather than the methodology, the graphical design, or other aspects.
- Avoid distorting what the data have to say.
  - Present many numbers in a small space, i.e., efficiently.
  - Make large data sets coherent.
  - Encourage the eye to compare different pieces of data.
  - Reveal the data at several levels of detail, from a broad overview to the fine structure.
  - Serve a clear purpose: description, exploration, tabulation, or decoration.
  - Be closely integrated with the statistical and verbal descriptions of the data set.

Our views of reports are based on his work and with WRN, we highlight issues of graphicacy with tables and charts. In this software, two types of bar charts are presented along with specific tables below them. They are organized into two groups: (a) for an individual student across prompts (and essays), and (b) by prompt across various students. The former display is likely the most critical because it is individually referenced, showing improvement, which is the goal of teaching and learning. The latter view, however, should not be ignored because it allows teachers to compare students with each other and possibly assist in effectively grouping students (e.g., emphasizing production for some or use of specific concepts-vocabulary for others). Note, that writing should lead to some kind of result that is present from the beginning in the form of a goal. Given the importance of goals, proficiency can be developed by attending to movement towards those goals.

### **Conclusion: Write, Write, Write**

Our final parting perspectives are about getting better at writing based on the *What Works Clearinghouse*, which involves models and practice, practice, practice, and practice. We consider learning skills like writing as no different than learning any other skills. Certainly, improvement takes good coaching, which is where teachers come in. However, given the diversity of students they need to teach, it is important to identify student-specific goals and then engage students in relentless practice. Some students need to practice conventions, while others may need to work on transitions, use of unique words, the sequence and structure of their writing, etc.

The problem with this strategy (specifying individual goals) is that teachers simply don't have the time to evaluate students' essays. Although practice is the coin of the realm in writing, evaluations of students' responses (essays) is simply not possible. WRN allows such

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<sup>1</sup> From E. R. Tufte. *The Visual Display of Quantitative Information, 2nd Edition*. Graphics Press, Cheshire, Connecticut, 2001.

individualization to be completed automatically. Every essay that is written is immediately evaluated and all that needs to be individualized is establishing the goal for writing at the outset.

For example, a student can be directed to self-evaluate their productivity (using any of several metrics) and their responses are automatically scored for them. This can be done with both quantitative and qualitative evaluations so that teachers are freed from the daily chore of reading all essays (which can be implemented regularly) and participate in student evaluations at key times (e.g., prior to end of quarter grades or in anticipation of parent conferences).

This strategy of practice makes perfect is exactly what happens in all performances, whether athletic or artistic. It is the repetitive nature of an activity that results in automaticity. As in the examples below, the best of the best become so by practice, day by day.

Two major reviews of research on the effects of practice have been conducted.

- MacNamara, Moreau, and Hambrick (2016)<sup>2</sup> conducted a meta-analysis on deliberate practice and performance in sports. As they note in their abstract, “Overall, deliberate practice accounted for 18% of the variance in sports performance.” Importantly, the effects of practice were more valuable for lower performers (versus higher performers).
- In Ericsson and Harwell’s (2019)<sup>3</sup> synthesis of research on the effects of practice, three types of practice were highlighted: (a) deliberate, (b) purposeful, (c) structured, and (d) naïve. They noted that the relation between practice and performance was considerably higher (29 and 61%), particularly if the practice was deliberate or purposeful.

With less academic and more sports-oriented sources, it is not uncommon to read perspectives on the effects of practice.

- Dayra Sinusoid describes three essential outcomes from practice on performance in sports reflecting that it: (a) builds sports-specific wisdom, (b) allows you to react quickly, and (c) makes athletes ‘unconsciously competent.

<https://www.shortform.com/blog/importance-of-practice/#:~:text=What%20role%20does%20practice%20play,makes%20you%20%E2%80%9Cunconsciously%20competent.%E2%80%9D>

- To improve in basketball, the following suggestions are made: (a) establish a routine, (b) maintain balance, (c) position your elbows, (d) focus your eyes, and (e) follow through. In the end, however, the following suggestion is made: “With anything in basketball practice makes perfect. Establish a routine and stick to it to maximize your results.

<https://www.ussportscamps.com/tips/basketball/5-tips-how-to-improve-free-throw-shot>.

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<sup>2</sup> Macnamara, B. N., Moreau, D., & Hambrick, D. A. (2016). The relationship between deliberate practice and performance in sports: A meta-analysis. *Perspectives on Psychological Science*, *11*(3), 333-350.

<sup>3</sup> Ericsson, K. A., & Harwell, K. W. (2019). Deliberate practice and proposed limits on the effects of practice on the acquisition of expert performance: Why the original definition matters and recommendations for future research. *Frontiers in Psychology*, *10*, <https://doi.org/10.3389/fpsyg.2019.02396>.



- In learning to improve in golf, five suggestions as made: (a) set your balance, (b) loosen your grip, (c) focus on finesse, not force, (d) keep your eye on the ball, and (e) practice, practice, practice.

<https://www.gcoftheeverglades.com/blog/31-5-golf-swing-tips-to-improve-your-game-today>

The adage “practice makes perfect” is more right than wrong (though the definition of perfect may need to be tweaked). As in all pursuits, improvement in writing requires writing. Ideally, this kind of practice is also in the presence of both good models and specific feedback.

### Summary

In conclusion, we have developed WriteRightNow (WRN) to seamlessly incorporate the three essential components: (a) formation of an effective prompt, (b) utilization of the writing process with three stages, and (c) provision of outcomes for teachers to monitor improvements. With many features present in WRN, teachers can both individualize writing interventions AND focus on writing, which is the primary route to improvement. However, with all that writing by students, it is likely that teachers would simply be overwhelmed. So, we have positioned WRN for teachers to get their time back.