



Taking Initiative on Writing

A Guide for Instructional Leaders

ANNE RUGGLES GERE

HANNAH A. DICKINSON

MELINDA J. MCBEE ORZULAK

STEPHANIE MOODY

Contents

ACKNOWLEDGMENTSvii

INTRODUCTION.....ix

1 SETTING INITIAL GOALS

CHAPTER 1 Surveying Writing Instruction in Your School 3

CHAPTER 2 Recruiting and Supporting Stakeholders.....11

CHAPTER 3 Developing Schoolwide Writing Goals 21

2 IMPLEMENTING ACTION STEPS

CHAPTER 4 Developing Content-Area and Grade-Level Writing Goals..... 33

CHAPTER 5 Providing Professional Development44

CHAPTER 6 Structuring Institutional Support 53

3 SUSTAINING AND IMPROVING A WRITING INITIATIVE

CHAPTER 7 Assessing Student Learning.....65

CHAPTER 8 Evaluating and Recruiting Teachers 72

CHAPTER 9 Conducting Programmatic Assessment 80

APPENDIX: APPLY FOR NCTE CERTIFICATION OF EXCELLENCE FOR WRITING INITIATIVE 91

AUTHORS	93
---------------	----

Introduction

The headline reads, “Writing Scores Drop Again,” and your phone has been ringing all day with parents, board members, and media representatives asking how you plan to improve writing instruction in your school.

or

A group of business leaders meets with you to talk about how your school can help prepare students for the world of work. They emphasize that they need employees who can write effectively, and they imply that students from your school don’t meet their standards.

or

On a return visit, a recent graduate of your school, an excellent student who went on to the university, says that she felt very well prepared in math and science, but she didn’t feel ready for college writing.

As an instructional leader, you have probably experienced a scenario like one of these—or it is a situation you are trying to avoid. You no doubt know that writing is increasingly important in the twenty-first century. You may be aware that U.S. workers write more now than at any time in history and that colleges expect students to be able to write well. The responsibility of preparing students to be college- and career-ready writers may be weighing heavily on you, and you might be feeling increasing pressure to take some action. The challenges of high-stakes writing tests; the expectations of stakeholders, including parents, board members, and central administration; and underprepared faculty all contribute to the weight. You’ve been dealing with local and state writing standards for several years, and now national core standards for writing have emerged. You’re likely wondering how to help teachers in your school face the challenges

of preparing students for national graduation and workplace standards such as the following:

- Establish and refine a topic or thesis that addresses a specific task and audience.
- Support and illustrate arguments and explanations with relevant details, examples, and evidence.
- Create a logical progression of ideas and events, and convey the relationships among them.
- Develop and maintain a style and tone appropriate to the purpose and audience.
- Demonstrate command of the conventions of standard written English, including grammar, usage, and mechanics.
- Write effectively in a variety of school subjects.
- Assess the quality of one's writing and strengthen it through revision.
- Use technology as a tool to produce, edit, and distribute writing.

English language arts teachers do play key roles in helping students become writers who can meet standards like these, but they cannot do it alone. In fact, some English teachers are not entirely confident about teaching writing. It will take a team effort. You have probably been an instructional leader long enough to know that improving student learning requires effort from many people headed in the same direction. Perhaps you'd like to exert leadership in developing an effective program of writing instruction in your school, but you're not sure where to begin.

This book will help you. It recognizes that you are a busy and cost-conscious instructional leader who needs a way to move forward. It lays out a full sequence of activities designed to assist you in creating an effective program of writing instruction in your school, an effective writing initiative. This sequence includes assessing the current program, developing a plan, implementing action steps, and continuing to sustain and improve the teaching of writing in your school. Each chapter lays out a series of steps to make the process manageable, and each chapter includes the evaluative tools, checklists, and guides that you will need. Each chapter also includes links to online resources developed by the National Council of Teachers of English (NCTE), the association known for its effective professional development for writing teachers. These links are indicated by this icon:



www.ncte.org/books/tiow

However, you may need to address one challenge before turning to practicalities: anticipating the beliefs, myths really, that some people may hold about writing instruction. Some of these myths have a powerful hold in our society because they have some basis in truth, but each one oversimplifies or obscures the real nature of writing and teaching writing. Developing an effective program of writing instruction and explaining it to stakeholders who may know little about teaching writing requires a full understanding of the scope of the task, and that means understanding the myths that may pose obstacles.

Myth: Writing instruction is the responsibility of English teachers alone.

Reality: It's true that English language arts teachers need to provide leadership in writing instruction because they often have greater expertise than their colleagues in other departments. But writing instruction in a school will never be effective if it is not reinforced by teachers in every other department. Furthermore, every content area poses its own challenges and requirements in terms of vocabulary, concepts, topics, and types of writing. Struggling writers have an especially difficult time differentiating between discipline-specific vocabularies, audiences, and genres. The lab report requires a different kind of writing than the research paper on a historical topic, and the features of good writing in both of these content areas need to be taught by science and social studies teachers, respectively, not English teachers.

Myth: Teaching writing means teaching grammar.

Reality: It is true that student writers need to learn how to control the conventions of Edited American English, and there will be occasions where teachers need to offer direct instruction in specific features such as the use of the semicolon or subject-verb agreement. However, attention to issues of grammar falls into what are called Lower-Order Concerns (LOCs) as compared with Higher-Order Concerns (HOCs) in writing instruction. HOCs include such things as learning how to approach and develop a topic, understanding how to address the concerns of a specific audience, organizing ideas so that they are coherent and convincing, and becoming comfortable writing for a variety of purposes. The complexity of learning each of these HOCs demonstrates why writing teachers need to spend most of their time on these rather than grammar and usage.

Myth: Good teachers of writing mark every error every time.

Reality: It is true that teachers need to be alert to errors or infelicities in student writing, but research shows that effective instruction does not mean marking all errors all the time. When teachers read students' early drafts, for example, it is usually more helpful to focus on higher order concerns such as the development of ideas, organization, and overall clarity. Lower-order concerns such as correctness at the sentence level can be addressed more effectively when writers have the general shape of the piece worked out. Similarly, research shows that marking every error every time is less effective than focusing marks on specific issues of usage. Students who receive papers covered with corrections can be so overwhelmed that they don't learn anything from the marks.

Myth: All responsibility for responding to student writing rests with the teacher.

Reality: It is true that teachers have ultimate responsibility for evaluative responses that are tied to grades, and they also have responsibility for giving students regular feedback on writing. This does not mean, however, that teachers are the only ones who can provide helpful responses to writing. Peer response can be effective in helping student writers understand what works well and what needs more development in their writing. For peer response to work most effectively, teachers need to help students learn what constitutes a helpful response to another writer and how to identify both strengths and weaknesses in the writing of others. In addition to peers, members of the community can offer helpful responses to student writing. One of the challenges for most student writers is developing a sense of audience, and responses from others in addition to the teacher helps develop that sense.

Myth: The purpose of school writing is to test students on what they have learned.

Reality: It is true that writing is often used to measure what students have learned in a given subject. The essay exam, the research paper, the report, and the short-answer quiz provide information about what students have learned in a variety of disciplines. But writing can do more than *show* learning; it can also *foster* learning. Through the process of writing, students develop a greater understanding of content in any field. Informal writing such as journal entries and reflections on reading or class discussion can be particularly effective in helping students learn.

In addition to fostering learning, such writing can also lead to improvement in the writing students do to show what they have learned.

Myth: Automatic essay scoring (AES) systems will soon replace human readers of student writing.

Reality: It's true that systems such as ETS's Criterion, Pearson's Intelligent Essay Assessor (IEA), the College Board's ACCUPLACER and WritePlacerPlus, and ACT's Compass are all being used to provide immediate feedback or to evaluate students' writing for placement purposes. However, the feedback such systems provide is limited to a few features of writing, and it is delivered in a highly generic way, roughly equivalent to using a rubber stamp to respond to student writing. Furthermore, these systems are confined to a narrow range of writing types and topics. They may be able to supplement, but they cannot replace the individual attention offered by a teacher who responds to student writing.

Myth: Students should learn everything about writing in elementary school.

Reality: It's true that elementary school students need instruction in writing, and without this background they will have difficulty writing in secondary school. But learning to write is not like learning to ride a bicycle; it's not a set of skills that need no further development once they have been achieved. Learning to write is an ongoing process that extends across all educational levels. Each new subject and each new form of writing poses new challenges; the transition to secondary school, in particular, poses the challenge of writing in many different subjects. The writer who produces imaginative narratives will probably stumble when first asked to write an evidence-based argument. The high school graduate who got As in English will often face unexpected challenges in college writing. Unlike math, where one principle builds on another, learning to write is a spiraling process that requires continuing development and practice throughout the entire experience of schooling.

Myth: Good writing means getting it right the first time.

Reality: It is true that most writers need to do some impromptu composing occasionally, but this method rarely produces the best writing. Good writing results from a more extended process that includes gathering ideas, finding arguments, writing drafts, getting responses to drafts,

revising for audience and purpose, and polishing or editing. This process helps writers develop ideas more fully, build connections between points so that the entire piece is clear, and eliminate the errors that can distract readers. Significantly, research shows that students who have extensive experience with using this process for writing do better on timed writing tests than those who have simply practiced timed writing again and again.

Myth: Good writers work alone.

Reality: It's true that writers need some time alone with the keyboard or pen, and we often see images of writers sitting alone at a desk or read real-estate ads with descriptions such as "isolated cottage, suitable for writer." But research shows that writing is a highly social activity. Good writers bounce their ideas off others as they begin a new project; many like to work in busy cafés, offices, or classrooms; they share their drafts with friends and colleagues so that they can revise more effectively; and they often read their work aloud to others to gauge how it will be received. Research on published authors shows—as you can see in the acknowledgments section of any book—correspondence and consultation with friends, family members, and editors. Most writers see themselves as part of a community, sharing ideas, drafts, and questions. It simply isn't true to say that good writers work alone. In fact, a writing initiative can tap into the communal nature of writing and provide wonderful ways to forge relevant connections with families, businesses, and universities.

NCTE 0.1 lists the research that supports the explanations undercutting each of these myths.



www.ncte.org/books/tiow

Understanding, moving beyond, and helping others move beyond these myths to a more complete and research-based account of writing and the teaching of writing will allow you to focus on developing a program of instruction that enables students in your school to become effective writers who are ready for higher education or the workplace. This book can help you accomplish your goals because it lays out each step of the process, showing what needs to be done and including the necessary materials. Each chapter concludes with a implementation scenario based on writing initiatives in real schools.

This is more than a book because every aspect of it is tied to (1) electronic resources that can be downloaded and used immediately; (2) links that connect you to professional development options and other materials focused on writing instruction; and (3) an online forum where you can share ideas with other instructional leaders who are taking initiative with writing. In addition, you can call on the resources of the National Council of Teachers of English, the professional association for English language arts teachers.

Now it is time to turn to the challenging but rewarding project of developing a program of instruction that will prepare your students to write effectively in the twenty-first century. This book is divided into steps that will help you to develop such a program, but, as you know, effective change takes time and continuing attention. Accordingly, the initial steps described in this book are designed to extend over several months, and the later steps over years. Section 1 focuses on the planning process, showing how you can assess your current program of writing instruction, recruit participants in effecting change, and develop goals. Section 2 outlines specific actions, including the development of writing goals and maps, professional development, and additional institutional support. Section 3 provides tools for assessing a wide variety of features including a new program of writing instruction, student learning, teacher quality, and the ongoing implementation of the program. Figure 0.1 shows how the steps outlined in these sections might map onto the school year.

NCTE 0.2 offers an elaborated version of the following timeline.



www.ncte.org/books/tiow

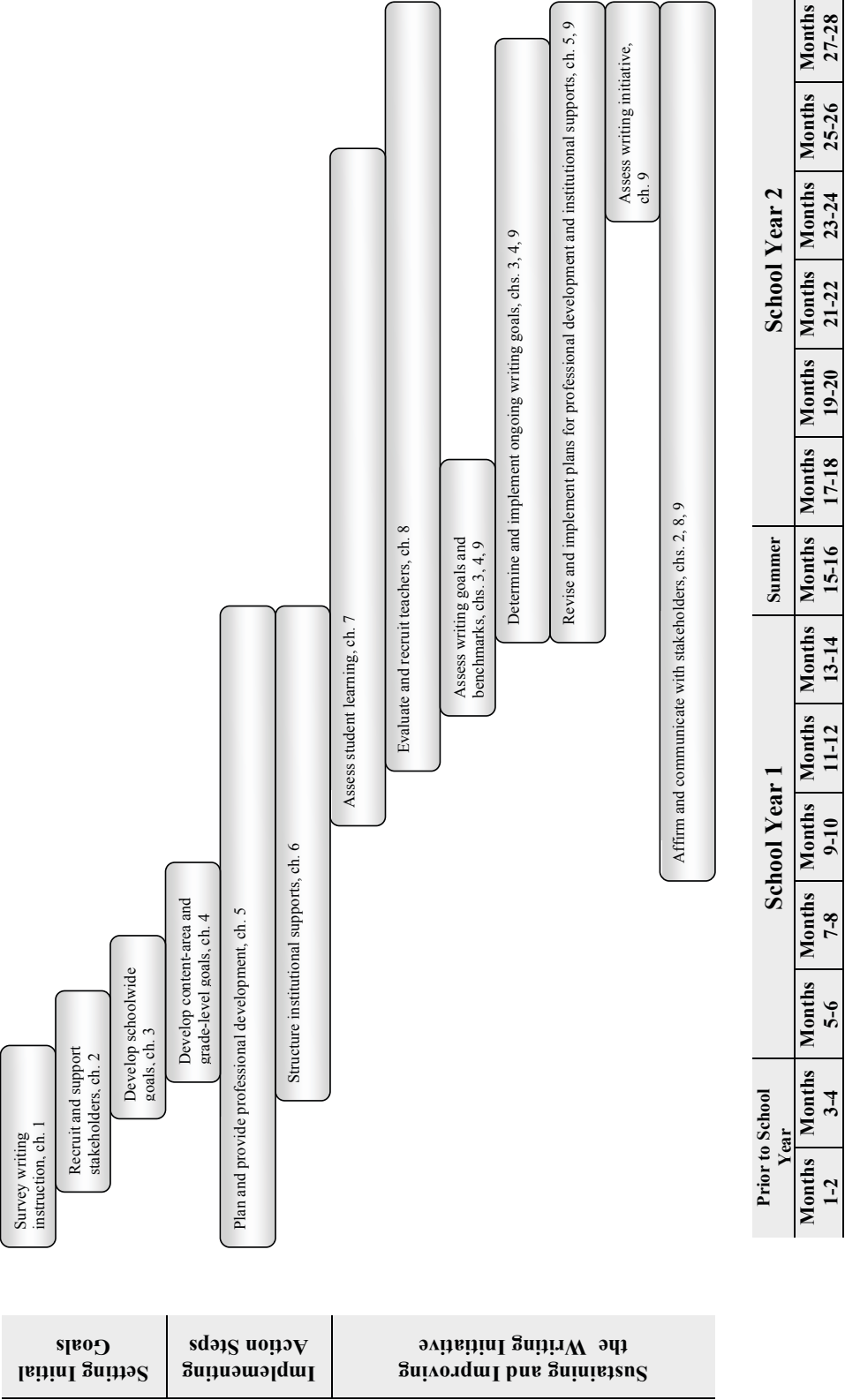


FIGURE 0.1. Sample Timeline for Writing Initiative

Literacy is the gateway skill to improving student achievement in all subjects. But writing is often the forgotten part of the literacy equation. Taking Initiative on Writing: A Guide for Instructional Leaders provides school leaders with both the what and the how of implementing a comprehensive, schoolwide approach to improving student writing. School leaders who are serious about improving student achievement, eliminating the achievement gap, and having all graduates prepared for postsecondary education and training will want to add this book to their professional libraries.

– Mel Riddile, Associate Director for High School Services, NASSP
2006 MetLife/NASSP National High School Principal of the Year

Taking Initiative on Writing: A Guide for Instructional Leaders provides research-based resources for principals who want to develop effective programs of writing instruction in their schools. Writing is an essential skill for learning in secondary school and for life after graduation. New national standards feature writing as a core area for college and career readiness. Following the plan outlined here will help students meet these new standards.

Individual teachers can make important contributions to the development of student writers, but only instructional leaders can engender schoolwide improvement. This guide is designed for busy and cost-conscious instructional leaders who want to develop an effective program of writing instruction that includes assessing the current program, developing plans, implementing action steps, and sustaining innovations over time. With an online component that enables readers to access resources and communicate with one another, this guide is designed to help leaders meet the challenge of preparing students to meet new national standards for writing.

NCTE National Council of
Teachers of English

1111 W. Kenyon Road
Urbana, Illinois 61801-1096
800-369-6283 or 217-328-3870
www.ncte.org

NATIONAL ASSOCIATION
OF SECONDARY SCHOOL
PRINCIPALS
promoting excellence in middle and high school leadership

1904 Association Drive
Reston, VA 20191-1537
703-860-0200
www.principals.org

ISBN 978-0-8141-4995-9



9 780814 149959

90000

