

Helping Students Cross the Threshold: Implications from a University Writing Assessment

The authors share the results of a study of college teacher expectations for student writing. Implications for secondary English teachers are addressed.

The first year of college offers students the double perspective of the threshold, a liminal state from which they might leap forward—or linger at the door.

—Nancy Sommers and Laura Saltz, “*The Novice as Expert: Writing the Freshman Year*”

Some *English Journal* readers may fondly (or not so fondly) remember reading lists for college-bound students, which were once routinely distributed to promote the reading of *The Scarlet Letter*, *Pride and Prejudice*, *The Pearl*, and other noteworthy classics. Today, virtually any English teacher would recognize that a focus on solely canonical texts was the greatest flaw of these lists; however, another important consideration exists: How did we know that college professors expected students to have read these books? Were faculty polled to learn if the reading lists mattered and why? Were focus group interviews conducted of students who had and had not read these books? Did an analysis of syllabi or assignments demonstrate a prevalence of these books in university classes? In short, what *assessment* confirmed the value of reading lists for college-bound students?

Because of the current testing craze across the country, we use the A-word, *assessment*, cautiously; however, *assessment* need not be an inherently negative word. As evidence, *EJ* readers should consider the writing assessment currently taking place across the country on university campuses. Unlike state-mandated tests, university assessment tends to be designed, implemented, and interpreted by local faculty and administrators for local purposes, such as to more accurately describe and analyze curricular programs, to enhance teaching, and to improve stu-

dent learning—all honorable objectives. Most importantly here for *EJ* readers, university assessment initiatives have the potential to provide highly relevant information to English teachers, especially those working with college-bound students.

To substantiate this claim, we share results and classroom implications from our assessment of faculty perceptions about writing at a regional, Midwestern campus of 20,000 students, many of whom are first-generation college students. To date, our study has revealed the following:

1. “Good” writing is a complex concept that varies by discipline.
2. The writing/reading connection is crucial.
3. Professors recognize that writing competency develops over time.

Although results and implications are discussed separately in this article, we see them as connected and overlapping, with the final result—professors recognize that writing develops over time—serving as a key “writing principle” (Atwell, *Lessons* 34). Additionally, we offer assessment strategies to help *EJ* readers respond to anecdotal claims and state assessment results in their own schools.¹

Our Students “Can’t Write”: The Story behind Our Assessment

Our assessment project began when our dean shared some bad news: Colleagues from other departments

were complaining that our students “can’t write,” so the dean challenged the English department to find out if the claim were true. The implication behind the negative anecdotal evidence and perhaps even the dean’s challenge seemed to be that the English department (specifically the composition program) wasn’t doing its job, so we felt understandably frustrated and defensive—the way English teachers feel when the media lament that “Johnny or Jenny can’t write.” We argued that the complaints were anecdotal and so not definitive; however, we didn’t dismiss the claims. We also agreed to find out more.

As a starting point, we designed an assessment plan to learn what faculty members mean when they say that students “can’t write.” We thought it was important to ask what assumptions about “good” writing professors hold, what assignments they require, and what pedagogical strategies, if any, they use to help students become stronger writers (and even whether they see it as their responsibility to help students become stronger writers).

To begin answering these questions, we first conducted a survey of faculty universitywide, and then we conducted three focus-group interviews, each with a subset of faculty who expressed interest in further discussion and who collectively represented all the colleges at our university.

Assessment Results and Teaching Implications

Assessment Result #1: “Good” Writing Is a Complex Concept That Varies by Discipline

[In my lower level classes,] we write . . . simple arguments and leave it to the 300- and 400-level courses . . . [for] writing more that’s related to that discipline.

What I’ll typically try to do is explain to them why we use Chicago Manual in history.

One of the things I notice is that students do not have a sense that there are differences, that writing expectations are going to be different in different disciplines.

The faculty members surveyed in our study identified numerous characteristics they associated with good writing, but the top five were good

grammar/mechanics, effective organization, clarity, logical/critical thinking, and support for claims or thesis statements. In addition, focus group participants emphasized necessary abilities associated with good writing: reading critically, understanding research processes, and having a positive attitude (such as a good work ethic, classroom professionalism, and a willingness to take intellectual risks) as central to academic success. However, humanities and non-humanities faculty differed on several rhetorical issues. Not surprisingly, they reported differences regarding citation style and genre preferences. Beyond these differences, however, humanities faculty reported valuing first-person perspective, personal experience as evidence, and longer paragraphs, as well as active voice and contractions; in contrast, non-humanities faculty reported valuing third-person perspective, shorter paragraphs, and technical jargon, as well as passive voice and no contractions. These differences (and others like them) reinforce what English teachers have long known: “good” writing is a highly elusive term, especially within the context of multiple disciplines.

Classroom Implications

Secondary-level English teachers can’t possibly know all the discipline-specific writing conventions their students will face in college classes across the curriculum, but they do already know to promote writing across the curriculum. Think of the well-traveled disciplinary bridges between English teachers and history, speech, and theater teachers. Consider the curricular inroads when English teachers assign writing with colleagues: lab reports with science teachers, exercise plans with physical education teachers, and music reviews with choral directors.

Despite these excellent strategies, however, we know that high school students and even some college students still tend to associate writing processes and products primarily with English classes, so we offer here two easy-to-implement strategies to promote greater awareness of the importance of and variations in writing across disciplines and fields. In suggesting these strategies, we fully acknowledge that no single assignment will magically transform

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students' perceptions about writing, but these two strategies would be excellent baseline activities.

The first strategy is a speaker series. On our campus, middle school students have participated in King-Chavez-Parks (KCP) workshops in which they meet several college graduates working in different fields. The graduates give lively talks about writing in their fields by making explicit key, discipline-specific rhetorical features: genres, writing processes, specialized knowledge, and jargon (to name just a few topics). Regardless of the field, all speakers emphasize how important writing is in their careers, even though none of the people work technically as writers, and an important message is loud and clear: writing matters across fields and disciplines. Taking inspiration from the KCP workshops, we propose that English teachers consider organizing similar guest speaker series. By periodically inviting one or two speakers, an English teacher would welcome several professionals into the classroom over the course of a school year, and students would benefit from this ongoing, multi-voiced discussion of writing practices and conventions across disciplines and fields. If the guest speakers were videotaped, their talks could be presented in classes outside of the English department or the taped talks could serve as a backdrop for our second strategy, explained next.

The second strategy is closely related to the first: Assign original research about writing beyond school borders. Working in research teams or as individual researchers, students could obtain, for example, résumés and/or job application letters from a local attorney, an advertising agent, a police officer, and a kindergarten teacher. How do these documents appear to be alike (that is, what genre features for résumés and application letters are consistent across the disciplines), and how do they differ (that is, what discipline-specific features emerge)? What do the similarities and differences reveal about each field, and what might they say about the values of professionals in these fields, including standards for "good" writing? Alternatively, students could conduct original research by interviewing local professionals in different fields—for example, engineering, restaurant management, and education—and ask the professionals to share five to ten nonsensitive documents they have written over the past week for a comparative analysis. What kinds of documents

do the professionals write, and how do the genres compare? What are the purposes, audiences, and formats? What specialized knowledge was necessary to write the documents, and how would the professional know if his or her document was successful? How central are the documents to helping the professional achieve on-the-job goals and objectives? Answers to these questions, which would be the basis for students' research results, would help to make more transparent the kinds of rhetorical variations that exist among disciplines and fields. Equally important, we predict that results will also help to discredit the myth that writing matters solely in English classes.

Assessment Result #2: The Reading/Writing Connection Is Crucial

[My students] have one- to two-page written essays for every class meeting, and . . . [it's] always on the reading assignment.

I was trying to teach how to use peer-reviewed journals [because] . . . part of it is critiquing research and part of it is bringing information from the literature and the research studies into their papers.

I teach mostly upper level students—juniors and seniors—and I see a disconnect for them . . . They can read [a source], they seem to understand what it is, but they really have a hard time making the connection with being able to say, "Okay, I've analyzed these three articles, this is the main theme, these are the things I'm seeing," and being able to articulate that.

The most common genre that faculty in our study reported assigning is an in-class essay; other common genres include critical analyses and research-based writing, as well as position papers, personal essays, lab reports, and literary interpretations. Regardless of genre, however, participating faculty generally agreed that writing assignments are based on reading and designed to help students learn class material. At least at our institution, then, faculty surveyed expect students to be able to read closely and accurately about an unfamiliar topic in an assigned scholarly or professional journal, book chapter, or website. To do this well, students must be able to figure out an author's main

point, consider how the author uses supporting evidence, and discern ideological bents and biases. Even after that initial legwork, though, students may find themselves returning to the readings to continue planning their papers, which may require a summary of the readings, along with integrating and citing multiple sources along with their own ideas. It is important to note that these kinds of prewriting/planning activities may differ substantially from those required for high school papers, which often ask students to brainstorm, freewrite, or otherwise reflect thoughtfully about a familiar topic or past experience, or that ask students to do library or Internet research to support long-established personal beliefs about a given topic.

Classroom Implications

English teachers already implement many excellent strategies to promote strong reading skills, but our assessment indicates that students need to be even more than good readers; they need to learn how to integrate their reading and writing—no easy task. With the ideas of “conversation” and “reading/writing connection” in mind, we have experienced tremendous success in our first-year composition courses by requiring Gerald Graff and Cathy Birkenstein’s *They Say/I Say: The Moves That Matter in Academic Discourse*, a book that provides hands-on strategies, useful models, and examples galore regarding the “nuts and bolts” of managing source materials. We recommend that *EJ* readers review *They Say/I Say* for classroom strategies and/or for potential adoption in their schools.

Teachers may also consider assigning in their classroom “dialogic papers,” a provocative assignment showcased by Tobi Jacobi in “Speaking the Language: Written Dialogue in the Composition Classroom.” Like *They Say/I Say*, a dialogic paper is a highly accessible resource that reinforces the concept of academic discourse being grounded in conversation, and it promotes the reading/writing connection.

To write a dialogic paper, students begin as they would for any research paper: coming up with a specific research question and then researching to learn as much as possible (or, in the case of some classes, researching first, coming up with the question, and then researching some more). Rather than writing a traditional essay, however, students create

the written script of an imaginary conversation, the kind that might take place if the authors of their sources met informally to discuss the topic at hand. What might the authors ask each other, and how would they respond? To what degree would the authors agree or disagree on the principles and practices related to the topic, and what factors or circumstances would influence the extent of their agreement—or lack thereof? Answering these questions and others like them requires close, critical reading of texts and synthesis of the various authors’ perspectives; it establishes the basis for a dialogic paper. As this description

suggests, the dialogic paper is designed to function as a helpful, interim step as students learn to synthesize differing viewpoints in an accessible voice and format, one that makes explicit the conversational basis of academic discourse.

Assessment Result #3: Professors Recognize That Writing Competency Develops Over Time

Students don’t understand that writing is a craft that you improve and you’re constantly improving and that it’s not as if [either] you can write or you can’t.

Getting students to follow directions is a huge first step, especially when 70% may be freshmen.

I think a lot of my students are scared to death of intellectual effort and generating ideas. So for me, part of the process is helping them feel safe and encouraging them in a number of ways to just take a risk, do something interesting.

Most faculty surveyed indicated that they recognize writing competency develops slowly over time and that they share responsibility for students’ growth as writers. Most faculty appeared to know that first-year students must be mentored over the course of their undergraduate work if they are to grow into increasingly skilled writers. Many faculty claimed, for example, that they adapt writing

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assignments based on the developmental needs of their lower- and upper-division students and that they design handouts, models, and/or activities to foster writing competency, a phenomenon they know takes time and practice to develop.

Classroom Implications

First, we believe that English teachers might reconsider the metaphors the field uses to describe writing. Consider, for example, two recent and well accepted “teaching writing” metaphors: Nancie Atwell’s “Teaching Anne to Tie Her Shoes” and Vicki Spandel’s “Baby’s First Steps” metaphors. Atwell’s metaphor, which describes the process of teaching her daughter to tie her shoes, demonstrates the need for a competent and caring adult to provide direct, hands-on instruction in incremental steps for a young learner, as opposed to the hands-off approach that Atwell advocated in the early-process years (*In the Middle* 19–20), and Spandel’s metaphor, which serves as a contrast to overly critical, traditionalist approaches, highlights parents’ unconditional praise and confidence, even when the baby inevitably stumbles and falls (63–64). English teachers justifiably value, even celebrate, these metaphors for the truths they reveal; however, a close analysis suggests that these metaphors more accurately describe the teacher’s role than the learner’s role. After all, barring an unforeseen accident or disability, tying shoes and walking are distinct skills mastered once and for all, whereas “no writer—college or professional—can ever really finish learning how to write” (Fontaine and Smith 2). As such, English teachers need new metaphors if they want to characterize writing and literacy growth as developing slowly over time.

So what are more apt metaphors for learning to write? According to Ralph Fletcher and JoAnn Portalupi, learning to ski is a good metaphor primarily because of the necessary learning conditions (4–5), but the skiing metaphor is also accurate because of the continual learning curve that skiing offers, which is consistent with the way that writing skills develop. After all, people can always grow as skiers by learning new skills, testing new equipment, and trying new terrains, and the same is true for writing. And though we find Fletcher and Portalupi’s skiing metaphor highly credible, an English teacher could persuasively argue for other,

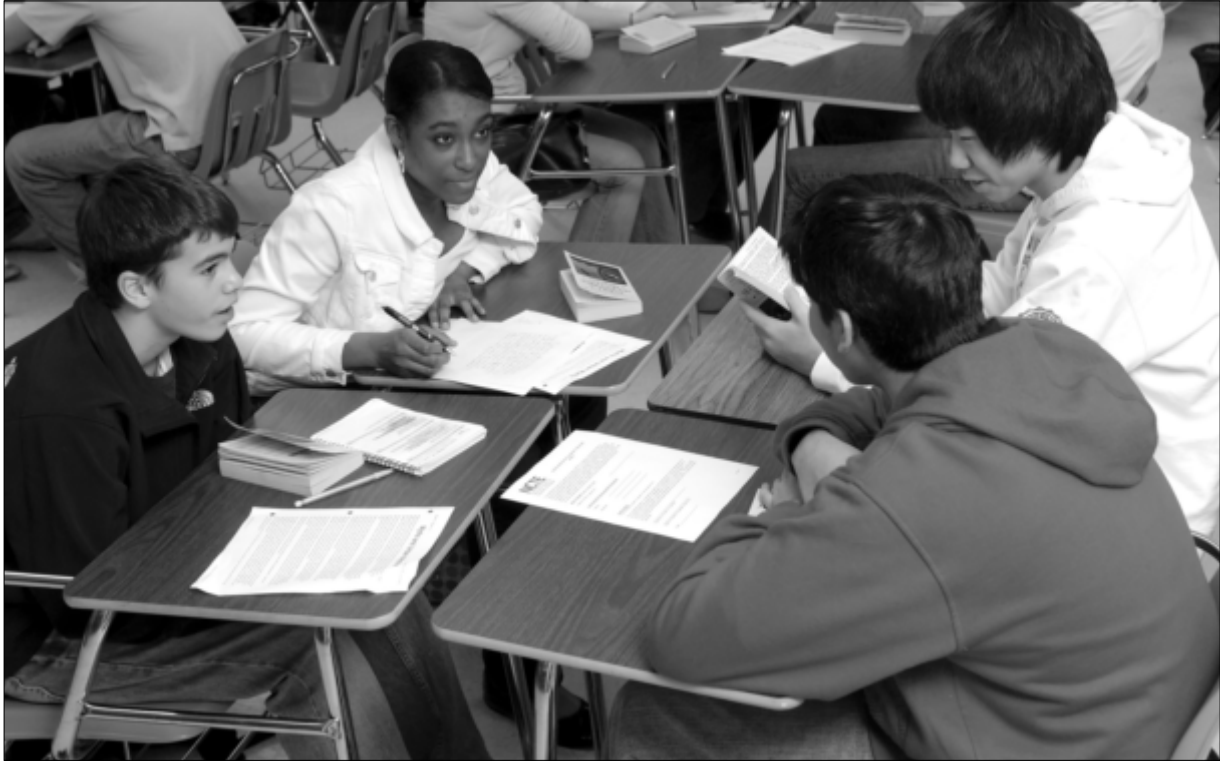
similar kinds of metaphors, such as learning a new musical instrument (piano, trombone, flute), a new sport (golf, tennis, basketball), or a new craft (antique-car restoration, needlepoint, fly-tying), the point being to select a skill/metaphor that is sensitive to the local school context and complex enough to provide never-ending opportunities for new challenges, risk taking, and growth potential: in short, a skill complex enough to require development over time, as writing does.

Metaphors momentarily aside, the more concrete teaching implication from our assessment work is to promote a developmental model of writing not only among English teachers but also among students; to this end, we offer two strategies that promote ongoing reflection about writerly growth and development.

First, students could be encouraged to reflect with a developmental mindset on their writing processes and products by answering questions such as the following:

- How is this paper like or different from other writings you have previously completed both inside and outside of the classroom?
- What aspects of writing this paper came easily, and what parts were more difficult?
- What was the best feedback you received while writing this paper? How might you apply that feedback in other writing?
- If you had more time to write, what would you have done differently with this paper?
- Having completed this paper, what do you know now that you wish you had known when the writing first began? How might that knowledge be applied in future writing?

Students might also be encouraged at the end of the school year to reflect on their writerly growth and development. In “Cultivating Our Own Gardens,” Atwell substantiates this excellent teaching practice by sharing the end-of-year reflections of two students, one who appears to have been highly literate from the outset and the other who appears to have lacked writerly confidence and skills. Regardless of attitude and skill, both students refer in their reflections to an impressive array of writings over the course of a single academic school year; equally impressive, however, are the students’ youthful insights regarding how they grew as writ-



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ers from September until June. *EJ* readers might be interested to know that ENG 101 students at our institution are asked to write about their writerly growth as the topic in both informal writing and formal essays.

A Developmental Model of Writing as a Principle of Good Writing

According to Atwell, English teachers already know they must continually encourage students to find and write about topics of great personal importance to foster enthusiasm for writing. If students are to be excellent writers, however, she claims that mere enthusiasm is not enough. Instead, English teachers must directly teach *principles of good writing* (*Lessons 34*). To clarify, Atwell showcases in *Lessons That Change Writers* a range of principles that her students say they valued most, from the concrete (The Rule of So-What?) to the more abstract (What Is Writing?). Moreover, Atwell indicates that principles of good writing are crucial in promoting literacy growth because they “help kids take on the perspective of an insider” and they “invite *novice writers* into the club” (*Lessons 34*; emphasis added).

What is the most important *writing principle* emerging from our assessment work? We believe all three findings are important and relevant to teachers who work with college-bound students, but one finding stands out as broader, further reaching, and more fully supported in composition scholarship: the idea that writing competency develops over time (see, among others, Caroll; Herrington and Curtis; Sommers and Saltz; Sternglass). We believe that this writing principle has tremendous importance for all students regardless of career goals and educational plans; however, given our purpose here, we find the principle especially relevant for students who plan to begin studies at community colleges and four-year institutions.

Graduating seniors intuitively perceive college as a new beginning in terms of leaving home, adjusting to campus life, and imagining new identities, but they may not perceive entering college and writing in a college setting in the same transitional and transformative light. More specifically, they may not understand that they’ll graduate from high school with crucial literacy skills and abilities, and that they will *continue to grow as writers* throughout college as they face new literacy challenges in

unfamiliar academic terrains. This growth is likely to be recursive in nature; it will naturally take the shape of ups and downs, forward and backward steps (and even leaps), and successes and “interim failures” (Gregory 76) as they transition from high school to college writing and beyond.

Nancy Sommers and Laura Saltz aptly describe the transition from high school to college as “a threshold” in writing, and they point out that successful college writers are most likely to define themselves as *novices*, which “involves adopting an open attitude to

Writerly growth requires time, productive mentoring relationships, practice/risk taking, and eventually performance.

instruction and feedback, a willingness to experiment, whether in course selection or paper topics, and a faith that, with practice and guidance, the new expectations of college can be met” (134). New college students who “cling to their old

habits and formulas and who resent the uncertainty and humility of being a novice” will be less successful in their transition to college writing (134).

Viewing successful college students as novice writers discredits the either/or perspective that students can or can’t write, and it reinforces the writing principle that writing abilities develop over time. After all, “novice” is a hopeful word filled with possibility, even promise. Writerly growth requires time, productive mentoring relationships, practice/risk taking, and eventually performance. Our assessment work brought this home to us, and we continue to work with this developmental process in mind across our university, talking with our dean and working on curriculum committees.

Assessment as Response and Change Agent

The message “You cannot write well” or “You are not meeting the standard” is hollow unless it’s accompanied by the comfort of a second message:

“Don’t worry—I can show you just what to do . . .”
 —Vicki Spandel, *The Nine Rights of Every Writer: A Guide for Teachers*


EJ readers can make use of our assessment approach easily when they encounter colleagues, administrators, or community members who claim that students “can’t write.” Simply ask what they mean by such a statement. This was our purpose when we sur-

veyed faculty across campus about their writing preferences and practices, but the same approach can be highly effective in one-on-one conversations—or at school board meetings and community events.

We also propose that English teachers consider creating and using assessment data in their schools. After all, our dean and the larger institution were receptive to our findings because they went beyond mere anecdote—we systematically gathered data. The study, for example, allowed us to argue more persuasively that we needed increased resources for a fledgling Writing Across the Curriculum program, and we were granted those resources. The study also supported recent curricular changes to our ENG 101 and ENG 201 courses. Perhaps most important, we believe that the study, which was highly publicized across campus through the Academic Senate, bolstered the credibility of the composition program at our institution.

Similarly, English teachers could make more persuasive claims regarding students’ literacy development, as well as faculty professional development and curricular needs, if they could support them with classroom or school data. In fact, Spandel claims that English teachers miss out on a golden opportunity when they allow only outside reviewers to assess their students’ writing: “It’s common these days to send writing assessment samples out of state to testing companies where they are read by teams of readers, not all of whom may be teachers—or writers. What a lost professional development opportunity for teachers. The chance to work with colleagues and to read . . . student samples can show teachers in a way nothing else can just where students are succeeding and where they are struggling” (99–100). According to Spandel, this assessment knowledge is “invaluable in designing instruction” (100), which our assessment work reinforces, but equally relevant here, the assessment data have the potential to offset, or at least provide a more nuanced understanding of, anecdotes about students’ writing abilities or our work as teachers of writing.

Despite the local focus of our assessment project, we strongly believe it has the potential to be helpful to English teachers nationwide in three ways. First, we believe our assessment results and teaching implications have relevance at the secondary level, especially for English teachers working with college-bound students. Second, we hope our

study inspires English teachers to examine other university assessment initiatives to see how results might influence their teaching practices and principles. Finally, we hope the study reinforces the pedagogical truth that assessment should always be intricately tied to curriculum development and classroom instruction. 

Editor's Note

1. For more information about classroom research conducted by secondary English teachers—and for a possible publication outlet for your research—please consult *EJ*'s "Research for the Classroom" column, edited by Julie Gorlewski.

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READWRITETHINK CONNECTION

Lisa Storm Fink, RWT

The authors invite students to go beyond school borders to find examples of real-world writing. The National Gallery of Writing (<http://www.galleryofwriting.org/>) contains writing from all walks of life and provides a lively reading experience. The Gallery is an opportunity for writers to share their craft and find a broad and diverse audience. These samples can then be used in the classroom or students can submit their own piece of writing.