An Administrator’s Guide to Writing Instruction

How to Use This NCTE Policy Brief

As teachers, we already know how much writing matters. Success in school, college, and the world of work all depend on the ability to write well. People today write more than their parents or grandparents, and the expanded reach of the Internet provides a wider potential audience for all writers. Schools need to prepare students for writing frequently for multiple audiences. The increasing number of English language learners, students with identified disabilities, and marginalized populations in classrooms can make this assignment challenging.

NCTE recognizes the growing importance of writing and established the National Day on Writing and the National Gallery of Writing to highlight the great variety of writing being done by people of all ages and stations. By including both school-based and non-school-based writing in the Gallery, NCTE affirms the importance of making connections between academic and non-academic writing. Research shows that student engagement increases when classrooms connect with out-of-school writing.

We teachers deliver writing instruction, but our ability to achieve goals is often shaped by administrators. Research shows that teachers can be much more effective when administrators position themselves as instructional leaders who believe in the importance of writing and exhibit knowledge about effective writing instruction.  

When we think about advocacy, we often turn to state capitals or Washington, DC. There is no question that policymakers at the state and national levels can have a profound effect on writing instruction, but advocacy at the local level matters too. Administrators play a key role in shaping the culture and working conditions in school and college classrooms.

Teaching writing is an area where some administrators do not feel entirely comfortable about serving as instructional leaders. An Administrator’s Guide to Writing Instruction identifies the features of successful classrooms and writing programs. It describes research-based approaches that lead to student achievement, and it explains how administrators can support effective writing instruction. With checklists and lists of features, it gives administrators tools to assess writing instruction and provide optimum conditions to improve student writing. By sharing this policy brief with administrators or board members at your school or college, you can help to create conditions that support effective writing instruction.

Want to know more?

National Gallery of Writing
http://galleryofwriting.org

Writing Now: An NCTE Policy Research Brief
http://www.ncte.org/store/books/writing/130170.htm

NCTE Beliefs about the Teaching of Writing
http://www.ncte.org/positions/statements/writingbeliefs

NCTE-WPA White Paper on Writing Assessment in Colleges and Universities
http://www.ncte.org/library/NCTEFiles/Resources/Positions/WPAwritingassessment.pdf

More Than a Number: Why Class Size Matters
http://www.ncte.org/positions/statements/whyclasssizematters

CCCC Position Statement on the Preparation and Professional Development of Teachers of Writing
http://www.ncte.org/cccc/resources/positions/statementonprep

CCCC Statement on Second Language Writing and Writers.
http://www.ncte.org/cccc/resources/positions/secondlangwriting
Questions for Hiring Writing Instructors

It is, of course, impossible to predict how successful any prospective teacher will be in the classroom, but the combination of scanning a candidate’s transcript for a course on the teaching of writing, viewing (when available) video clips of the candidate teaching writing, and asking questions that touch on the topics below can help identify the most promising applicants.

**Writing Processes.** Nearly all applicants will claim to approach writing as process, but probing for details about implementation, including teaching strategies for developing ideas, creating a draft, and, especially, revising and editing the draft, will reveal the applicant’s depth of knowledge.

**Reading-Writing Connection.** Effective writing instructors will explain that reading provides strategies and other resources for writers.

**Multiple Forms.** Students need to write in many different genres—letters, essays, stories, poetry, and blogs, for example—and they need opportunities for informal (low-stakes and impromptu) as well as formal (composed over time and graded) writing. A promising candidate will be able to describe several possible assignments that include this range.

**Connection between Instruction and Assessment.** Effective teachers can explain how an assignment leads to classroom activities that support student writers and how, in turn, the evaluation of writing is linked to assignments and further growth in writing.

**Use of Technology.** Writing in the 21st century is directly tied to new media, and research shows that students are more engaged with learning when they use technology. Effective instructors will be able to describe how they integrate technology into their teaching.
Writing and Learning. Research shows that writing aids learning in all disciplines, and a promising applicant will be able to explain how formal and informal writing help students learn.8

Guide for Observation of Writing Classes

Student achievement is the ultimate measure of teacher quality. Accordingly, each of the following questions, which draws on a principle that characterizes effective writing instruction, is framed in terms of students’ knowledge and behavior. Sharing walk-through observations of classes with an experienced writing teacher can help improve the quality of instruction and at the same time enable administrators to share findings across multiple departments.9 Observation of a classroom with a highly effective teacher of writing would yield all answers in the affirmative. In addition to classroom observations, administrators can learn about teachers’ effectiveness by noting public displays of student writing, by examining student work samples, or by observing students writing outside the classroom.

- Do students write every day?
- Is the use of copying in writing very limited?
- Do students keep journals or participate in other types of informal writing?
- Do students exhibit familiarity with many forms or genres of writing?
- Do students refer to writing strategies used by authors whom they have read?
- Do students use computers for writing and gathering information?
- Do students demonstrate ability to distinguish between reliable and unreliable sources of information on the Internet?
- Do students demonstrate knowledge of multiple strategies for generating ideas for writing?
- Do students share their writing in progress with one another?
- Do students participate in brief individual writing conferences with their teachers?
- Do students exhibit ability to comment constructively on the writing of their peers?
- Do students show that they can distinguish between revising (conceptualizing or rethinking a piece of writing) and editing (correcting errors in spelling, punctuation, and sentence structure)?

- Is student writing displayed in the classroom or in class publications, either on paper or online?
- Do students demonstrate understanding of the criteria used to evaluate their formal writing?
- Can students construct a rubric or scoring guide to evaluate writing?
- Do students express confidence about their abilities as writers?
- Do students use writing as a way of learning?
- Do students have opportunities to see teachers model their own writing?

Guidelines for Institutional Support of Writing Instruction

Excellent writing teachers and excellent writing instruction thrive when administrators and policymakers provide strong institutional support at the school, district and/or state level. Support for writing teachers and programs includes policies on class size, access to computers or necessary technology, attention to writing in all subjects, special provisions for diverse learners, and professional development that addresses teacher areas for growth identified in evaluative observations.

Class Size: Under optimum conditions the normal teaching load for writing instructors should be no more than four classes of twenty students. Schools and colleges that give high priority to writing instruction should adopt policies and plans that work toward this goal.

Technology: Because writing in the 21st century is linked directly to digital forms, schools and colleges should aim to provide adequately furnished computer labs and classroom computer access for writing instruction. Support personnel for hardware is also essential for teachers to use technology effectively in writing instruction.

Writing in All Subjects: Because writing is both a way to foster and to demonstrate learning, students should write in every class. Strong writing programs are not limited to departments of English but extend across all subjects. With administrative leadership and professional development programs focused on writing across the curriculum, schools and colleges can teach students to write effectively for a variety of audiences in various fields.

Effective Evaluation: High-stakes assessments that ask students to produce a piece of impromptu writing during a timed test provide a very limited measure of the totality
of writing instruction. In contrast, assessment that uses multiple and extended samples of student writing supports effective writing instruction at the same time that it provides a more accurate measure of student achievement. Administrators who use the Guide for Observation of Writing Classes will be able to evaluate more completely the quality of writing instruction, and they will also know where teachers need improvement.

**Professional Development:** Writing teachers need regular opportunities to continue their own growth, and a well-developed system of professional development insures that this will happen. Effective professional development relies on a rich mix of resources, including a theoretical and/or philosophical base, a research base, and illustrations of good practices. Evaluation of teachers should contribute directly to the creation of professional development opportunities so that teachers who demonstrate a need for growth in a given area will be able to turn to professional development to address them. Regardless of the specific content, all professional development should include opportunities for teachers

- to write, as a means of developing, shaping, representing, and communicating experiences, beliefs and identity.
- to read and respond to the writing of students and colleagues.
- to experience writing as a way of learning.
- to assess the progress of individual writers by responding to complete pieces of their writing and studying changes in their writing.
- to study writing in relation to other disciplines.
- to study research on the teaching of writing.

**Diverse Learners:** English language learners and students with disabilities require extra help from writing instructors, so class size needs to be adjusted so that teachers can give such students the attention they need. Ideally, classes with a substantial number of English language learners or students with disabilities should be limited to a maximum of 15 students. Teachers who work with diverse learners like these need professional development that keeps them up to date on the best strategies for helping these students develop as writers. Such teachers can also benefit from professional development that prepares them for collaborative teaching arrangements where a content specialist and disability/ELL specialist work together to address the learning needs of all students.

**Endnotes**


