

# Write-Minded

## New report identifies top writing strategies

In 2002, the National Assessment of Educational Progress tested writing skills in 4th, 8th and 12th grade students. Using newspaper articles, photographs, cartoons, letters and poems to stimulate writing, the NAEP asked students to write for three main purposes: narrative, information, and persuasive.

The test was administered to 139,000 4th graders, 119,000 8th graders, and 19,000 12th graders.

The results indicated that only 28 percent of 4th graders, 21 percent of 8th graders, and 22 percent of 12th graders scored at or above the proficient level. While both 4th and 8th graders demonstrated small improvement from scores taken in 1998, the difference in scores for the high school seniors was statistically insignificant.

In an information-based economy, having a workforce unskilled in written communications is costly. In 2005, the College Board's National Commission on Writing estimated that private companies spend more than \$3 billion each year to teach employees how to write.

Motivated by a desire to strengthen the writing skills of U.S. students, a new report co-authored by Steve Graham, Currey Ingram Professor of Special Education, has identified 11 strategies to improve the writing skills of the



Steve Graham

nation's adolescents. The report was presented at a briefing Oct. 19 in Washington, D.C. Graham's co-author is Dolores Perin, associate professor of psychology and education at Teachers College, Columbia University.

"We undertook this research to determine what we could do to change writing achievement and writing

instruction in this country," Graham said. "We've identified 11 strategies as being effective at teaching students how to write and improve their achievement."

The report, *Writing Next: Effective Strategies to Improve*

*Writing of Adolescents in Middle and High School*, is designed to address this critical shortfall in student learning and achievement. It was released by the Alliance for Excellent Education and commissioned by Carnegie Corporation of New York. The report is a companion publication to the Alliance's 2004 report, *Reading Next:*

*A Vision for Action and Research in Middle and High School Literacy.*

"Reading proficiency is just half the literacy picture," Bob Wise, former governor of West Virginia and Alliance president, said. "We have to

widen the literacy spotlight to include writing as well as

reading. Increasing students' writing abilities increases their literacy abilities, which in turn, increases the likelihood that they will stay in school and graduate. And that means they have a much better chance for future success."

Graham and Perin conducted a meta-analysis of existing experimental and quasi-experimental research on a variety of writing instructional methods and were able to glean from this

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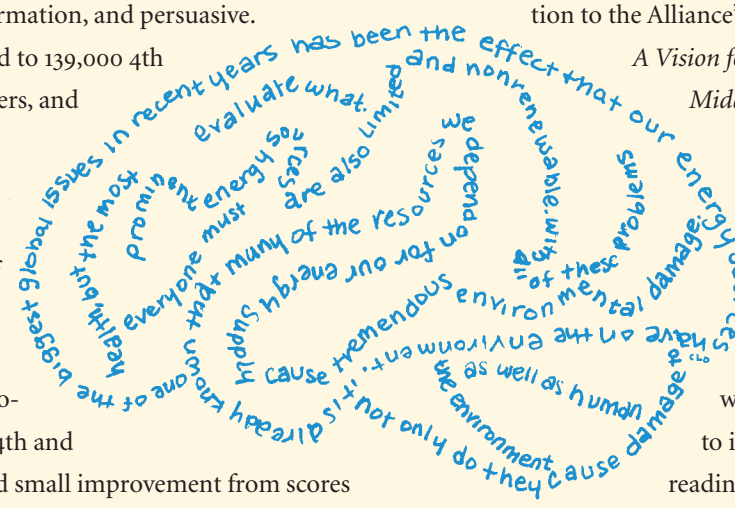
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comparison data the most effective strategies. The last

such comprehensive review of the research literature was conducted by George Hillocks 20 years ago, Graham noted.

"In our meta-analysis we always compared a treatment versus some control or comparison treatment. So there were always at least two treatments in the study," Graham said during remarks at the National Press Club. "We were looking for big ticket effects: what kind of interventions changed the overall quality of what students do."

Graham and Perin identified 11 instructional practices that *Writing Next* recognizes as holding the most promise to improve students' writing skills, in order of statistical strength. The two most powerful procedures involved the explicit teaching of process, Graham said.



“The first one was teaching writing strategies to kids. This basically meant teaching kids how to plan, how to revise, how to edit, how to regulate the writing process, or a combination of those. By doing that the teachers were initially modeling how to do this, and then students were given assistance as they applied this, working toward independence in the use of those strategies. So it was systematic. It was explicit,” Graham said.

“The second procedure that also had a very strong effect was teaching kids directly how to summarize written material,” he said.

The third finding was that having students collaborate around process, planning, revising, and editing in some combination also was very effective. Graham cautioned, however, “I’m not talking about throwing kids together and saying, ‘You guys go off and work together.’ These were structured procedures where kids had a clear idea of what they were to do. So, for example, if it was revising, they were provided or taught how to carry through on giving feedback to their peers on very specific aspects of their writing.”

In addition to writing strategies, summarization, and collaborative writing, Graham and Perin offered the following strategies:

**SPECIFIC PRODUCT GOALS:** Specific, reachable goals for the writing assignment they are to complete.

**WORD PROCESSING:** Using computers and word processors as instructional supports for writing assignments.

**SENTENCE COMBINING:** Teaching students to construct more complex, sophisticated sentences.

**PREWRITING:** Engaging students in activities designed to help them generate or organize ideas for their composition.

**INQUIRE ACTIVITIES:** Engaging students in analyzing immediate, concrete data to help them develop ideas and content for a particular writing task.

**PROCESS WRITING APPROACH:** Interweaving a number of writing instructional activities in a workshop environment that stresses extended writing opportunities, writing for authentic audiences, personalized instruction and cycles of writing.

**STUDY OF MODELS:** Providing students with opportunities to read, analyze and emulate models of good writing.

**WRITING FOR CONTENT LEARNING:** Using writing as a tool for learning content material.

In closing his remarks, Graham emphasized that *Writing Next* is not a curriculum for teaching writing. “These are things that can enhance what we already do. There’s a delivery issue here.”

### The Importance of Penmanship: Handwriting a Valuable Skill, Influences Learning

Did you know there is a National Handwriting Day? Given the low emphasis placed on handwriting in many schools, you can be forgiven. Though the significance of this obscure day might be lost to many, the skill of handwriting shouldn’t be, according to Professor Steve Graham, an expert not only on writing but on handwriting.

“Handwriting is one of the basic building blocks of good writing and plays a critical role in learning,” said Graham. “Young children who have difficulty mastering this skill often avoid writing, and their writing development may be arrested. They also may have trouble taking notes and following along in class, which will further impede their development.”

Graham suggests that a return to consistent handwriting instruction, with an understanding of the challenges different children face, would not only result in more legible papers but also support overall learning across subjects.

“Teachers need to continue to teach their students how to properly form and join letters. We found that this sort of instruction takes place for 10 minutes or less a day in most schools, down from two hours a week in the 1950s,” he said.

“At home, there are many things that parents can do to help their young children improve their penmanship. Activities such as identifying and tracing letters, forming letters from memory, copying words and playing timed games to see how quickly they can accurately produce written letters and words all go toward building this skill.”



Steve Graham’s research has focused primarily on identifying the factors that contribute to the development of writing difficulties; the development and validation of effective procedures for teaching planning, revising and the mechanics of writing to struggling writers; and the use of technology to enhance writing performance and development.

He is the editor of *Exceptional Children* and the coauthor of the *Handbook of Writing Research*, *Handbook of Learning Disabilities*, *Writing Better*, and *Making the Writing Process Work*. He is a Vanderbilt Kennedy Center for Research on Human Development investigator.

The Alliance for Excellent Education is a Washington, D.C.-based policy, research and advocacy organization that works to make every child a graduate, prepared for post-secondary education and success in life. To learn more about the Alliance, visit [www.all4ed.org](http://www.all4ed.org).

*Writing Next* is available online at [www.all4ed.org/publications/WritingNext/index.html](http://www.all4ed.org/publications/WritingNext/index.html)