



School Improvement Booster

An e-newsletter provided by
Iowa School Finance Information Services (ISFIS)

April 2014: Writing

ISFIS PARTNERS WITH PEARSON LEARNING

ISFIS has entered into a partnership with Pearson Learning to offer WritetoLearn® to Iowa schools. WritetoLearn® is a fully automated online literacy tool for building writing skills and developing reading comprehension for students in grades 4-12. The program focuses on practice essays, summary writing and vocabulary building, provides immediate and specific feedback to students, aligns to the Common Core State Standards as well as the 6 Traits of Writing® scoring rubric, and helps teachers assign writing, score writing, and integrate writing across the curriculum without demanding oodles of teacher time to grade it. ISFIS provides extensive training and support to districts subscribing to this services. [Read more below](#) or [visit our webpage on WritetoLearn®](#).

Iowa continues to be one of the few states that doesn't require school districts to assess student writing. As a result, writing instruction may take a back-burner to other literacy skills that educators know will be on the state test. Relegating writing to a lesser priority is counterproductive because writing improves reading comprehension. No surprise to you language arts specialists out there. But teachers of science, social studies, the arts, math, and other non-language arts subjects can build their students' knowledge base and elevate comprehension of the subject being studied when their students write about content.

Of course writing is a critical college and career ready skill, and not just one for future newspaper reporters. If you're a police officer or fire fighter, you must complete clear and concise incident reports that communicate what happened and can later be used in the courts. If you're a nuclear physicist doing research, you must write the results of your studies so others can replicate or disprove your findings. If you're a teacher or a principal, communicating through writing regularly with parents and the community is a critical and necessary skill. If you're a novelist, you express your soul in written language. In other words, it's a rare 21st century vocation that doesn't require mastery of writing.

This ISFIS School Improvement Booster shares how the country and Iowa are doing in the teaching of writing and offers support for teachers and principals working to improve writing instruction. Additionally we will introduce you to a new ISFIS program that can help in your writing instructional work. A short discussion of electronic scoring of student writing and the research behind it follows. Finally, we'll finish up with our usual quotes section, this month about writing.

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SUCCESS IN HIGHER ED AND THE WORK FORCE REQUIRES WRITING SKILLS

Cause for Alarm from Writing Next

Writing Next offers these and other reasons why America is in a writing crisis:

- Seventy percent of students in grades 4–12 are low-achieving writers (Persky et al., 2003).
- Nearly one third of high school graduates are not ready for college-level English composition courses (ACT, 2005).
- Over half of adults scoring at the lowest literacy levels are dropouts, and almost a quarter of these persons are high school graduates (National Center for Education Statistics, 2005)
- Thirty-five percent of high school graduates in college and 38% of high school graduates in the workforce feel their writing does not meet expectations for quality (Achieve, Inc., 2005).
- About half of private employers and more than 60% of state government employers say writing skills impact promotion decisions (National Commission on Writing, 2004, 2005).
- “Poorly written applications are likely to doom candidates’ chances for employment” (National Commission on Writing, 2005, p. 4).
- Writing remediation costs American businesses as much as \$3.1 billion annually (National Commission on Writing, 2004).

CURRENT STATUS OF WRITING IN IOWA

National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP), Writing

The most recent testing of writing was done through the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) in 2011. This was a new test and students entered all of their writing on a computer, reflecting the national move toward electronic composition. “The 2011 writing assessment results are based on nationally representative samples of 24,100 eighth-graders from 950 schools, and 28,100 twelfth-graders from 1,220 schools. The sample design for the first computer-based writing assessment was not intended to report results for individual states or large urban districts. The 2011 test will serve as a baseline for all future NAEP writing assessments.” Here are some findings from the 2011 NAEP in writing at 8th and 11th grade:

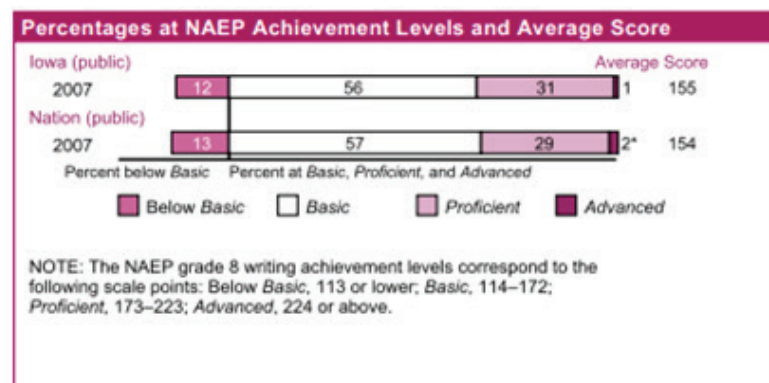
8th graders

- 27% of eighth-graders perform at or above proficient.
- Students whose teachers asked them to use computers to draft and revise their writing scored higher than those whose teachers asked them less frequently to use computers to draft and revise.
- Students whose teachers never asked them to draft and revise their writing on a computer scored lowest.
- Students qualifying for the national school lunch program (free and reduced price meals) had teachers who asked them to draft and revise less frequently on the computer

12th graders

- 27% of twelfth-graders performed at or above proficient
- Students who write four to five pages a week for English/language arts homework score higher than those who write fewer pages.
- Students who use a computer more frequently to edit their writing score higher.

Since Iowa doesn’t assess writing and the 2011 NAEP writing assessment isn’t reported by state, this is the most recent data regarding Iowa students’ writing that is available. This is the overall performance from the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) in 2007 comparing Iowa to the nation. This performance is not significantly different from the national average. “Of the 45 states and one other jurisdiction that participated in the 2007 eighth-grade assessment, students’ average scale score in Iowa was higher than those in 13 jurisdictions, not significantly different from those in 20 jurisdictions, and lower than those in 12 jurisdictions.”



Below you will find Iowa's 2007 NAEP writing performance by subgroup. The gap between girls and boys was wider than the national average, but other gaps were not significantly different than the national average.

Reporting groups	Percent of students	Average score	Percent below Basic	Percent of students at or above		Percent Advanced
				Basic	Proficient	
Male	52	143	19	81	17	#
Female	48	167↑	6	94	47↑	2↓
White	87↑	157↓	11↑	89↓	33↓	1↓
Black	5↓	134↓	29↑	71↓	13	#
Hispanic	5↓	133	29	71	14	#
Asian/Pacific Islander	2↓	173	2	98	49	6
American Indian/Alaska Native	#↓	‡	‡	‡	‡	‡
Eligible for National School Lunch Program	31↓	140	23	77	18	#
Not eligible for National School Lunch Program	69↑	161	8	92	38	1↓

RESOURCES FOR EDUCATORS

What does the [Iowa Core say about writing?](#)

These are the Iowa Core College and Career Readiness standards for writing, the broad standards that permeate the more specific grade level standards. Grade level standards can be found in the link above.

Text Types and Purposes

1. Write arguments to support claims in an analysis of substantive topics or texts, using valid reasoning and relevant and sufficient evidence.
2. Write informative/explanatory texts to examine and convey complex ideas and information clearly and accurately through the effective selection, organization, and analysis of content.
3. Write narratives to develop real or imagined experiences or events using effective technique, well-chosen details, and well-structured event sequences.

Production and Distribution of Writing

4. Produce clear and coherent writing in which the development, organization, and style are appropriate to task, purpose, and audience.
5. Develop and strengthen writing as needed by planning, revising, editing, rewriting, or trying a new approach.
6. Use technology, including the Internet, to produce and publish writing and to interact and collaborate with others.

Research to Build and Present Knowledge

7. Conduct short as well as more sustained research projects based on focused questions, demonstrating understanding of the subject under investigation.
8. Gather relevant information from multiple print and digital sources, assess the credibility and accuracy of each source, and integrate the information while avoiding plagiarism.
9. Draw evidence from literary or informational texts to support analysis, reflection, and research.

Range of Writing

10. Write routinely over extended time frames (time for research, reflection, and revision) and shorter time frames (a single sitting or a day or two) for a range of tasks, purposes, and audiences.

The 6+1 Trait® Writing Model

Education Northwest (initially called the Northwest Regional Education Lab) along with teachers and curriculum experts developed the [6+1 Trait® Writing Model of Instruction & Assessment](#) in the early 1980s. This model continues to be used throughout the country today.

The 6+1 Trait® Writing Model of Instruction & Assessment identifies these components for quality writing:

1. **Ideas:** The Ideas are the main message, the content of the piece, the main theme, together with all the supporting details that enrich and develop that theme.
2. **Organization:** Organization is the internal structure of a piece of writing, the thread of central meaning, the pattern and sequence, so long as it fits the central idea. Organizational structure can be based on any number of identifiable text structures.
3. **Voice:** Voice is the writer coming through the words, the sense that a real person is speaking to us and cares about the message. It is the heart and soul of the writing, the magic, the wit, the feeling, the life and breath.
4. **Word Choice:** Word Choice is the use of rich, colorful, precise language that communicates not just in a functional way, but in a way that moves and enlightens the reader. I

5. **Sentence Fluency:** Sentence Fluency is the rhythm and flow of the language, the sound of word patterns, the way in which the writing plays to the ear, not just to the eye.
 6. **Conventions:** The Conventions trait is the mechanical correctness of the piece and includes five elements: spelling, punctuation, capitalization, grammar/usage, and paragraphing. Writing that is strong in Conventions has been proofread and edited with care.
- + 1 **Presentation:** Presentation combines both visual and textual elements. It is the way we exhibit or present our message on paper.

Side-by-Side Comparison of 6 Traits and Common Core State Standards

Northwest Education has provided [a side-by-side crosswalk](#) of the 6-Traits + 1 and the Common Core State Standards (CCSS). They chose to focus on the first three Writing standards for this crosswalk because these standards address the three writing modes targeted by the CCSS for all grades: 1) argumentative, 2) informative/explanatory, and 3) narrative.

Writing Improves Reading

In [Writing to Read](#) (Carnegie Corporation of New York 2010) Hebert and Michael share their findings from a meta-analysis of how writing improves reading comprehension. They make these recommendations:

1. Have students write about the texts they read.
2. Teach students the writing skills and processes that go into creating text.
3. Increase how much students write.

This helpful report also includes a list of strategies related to using writing to improve reading and their effect sizes. Some of those listed with strong effects include teaching students summary writing, construction of written maps of texts, and writing a one sentence summary after each paragraph.

Advice for Teachers

In the April 2014 [Educational Leadership](#) devoted to developing student writing, Carol Jago in “Writing Is Taught, Not Caught” invites teachers to do three things to help students write well:

1. Give them something to write about.
2. Afford frequent opportunities to write.
3. Provide thoughtful feedback.

Ms. Jago notes, “When I was a young teacher, I believed in a field-of-dreams approach to writing instruction: Build it, and they will come. Invite students to write at length about whatever they want, and they will magically morph into good writers... Many years and many red pens later, I know better. If we expect students to learn to write, we need to teach them how. This means embedding in our practice daily opportunities for students to write, combined with deliberate instruction about the moves good writers make as they compose.”

A Story of How Writing Improved Student Learning at One High School

Peg Tyre in the “[Writing Revolution](#)” shared in the Atlantic Monthly, September 19, 2012 tells the story of the rejuvenation of New Dorp High School, a low performing school in New York that used writing as the means for increasing learning and giving hope to its students. “...(F)aced with closure, the school’s principal went all-in on a very specific curriculum reform, placing an overwhelming focus on teaching the basics of analytic writing, every day, in virtually every class. What followed was an extraordinary blossoming of student potential, across nearly every subject—one that has made New Dorp a model for educational reform.”

Recommendations for Adolescent Literacy Development, Specifically Writing

[Writing Next](#) (Carnegie Corporation of New York 2007) makes these recommendations for teaching adolescents to write well and use writing as a tool for learning.

1. Writing Strategies, which involves teaching students strategies for planning, revising, and editing their compositions;
2. Summarization, which involves explicitly and systematically teaching students how to summarize texts;
3. Collaborative Writing, which uses instructional arrangements in which adolescents work together to plan, draft, revise, and edit their compositions;
4. Specific Product Goals, which assigns students specific, reachable goals for the writing they are to complete;
5. Word Processing, which uses computers and word processors as instructional supports for writing assignments;
6. Sentence Combining, which involves teaching students to construct more complex, sophisticated sentences;
7. Prewriting, which engages students in activities designed to help them generate or organize ideas for their composition;
8. Inquiry Activities, which engages students in analyzing immediate, concrete data to help them develop ideas and content for a particular writing task;
9. Process Writing Approach, which interweaves 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;
10. Study of Models, which provides students with opportunities to read, analyze, and emulate models of good writing; and
 11. Writing for Content Learning, which uses writing as a tool for learning content material

WHAT ISFIS IS DOING TO HELP

Write to Learn®

Several years ago, we ran across a study that said machines can score essays as well as humans, done by Mark Shermis, Dean of the College of Education at the University of Akron. After reading the article about that first study, we did more reading and talked to various companies about their work in this arena. As a result of the information we gathered and a wish to support schools in their efforts to teach writing, ISFIS has entered into a partnership with Pearson Learning to offer WritetoLearn® to Iowa schools.

WriteToLearn® is a fully automated online literacy tool for building writing skills and developing reading comprehension for students in grades 4-12. The program instantly assesses student writing by evaluating the meaning of text, not just grammar and spelling. Students receive personalized feedback, hints, and tips throughout the writing experience to encourage, instruct, and reward progress as they complete practice assigned and monitored by their teachers. The program is aligned to both the Common Core State Standards, as well as the 6 Traits of Writing® scoring rubric.

WritetoLearn® offers three activities for improving literacy skills:

- Summary Writing to develop reading comprehension
- Vocabulary exercises to expand word knowledge
- Essay Writing to build writing skills

As usual, ISFIS will provide extensive training and support to schools who subscribe to this new service.

We believe WritetoLearn® is an excellent service for a number of reasons. Teachers need time to respond to student writing. It is nearly impossible to provide timely feedback when faced with 150 papers every time a writing assignment is made. WritetoLearn® requires teacher involvement, but saves teacher time, so teachers are eager to assign significant writing to their students. WritetoLearn® offers more than 1,000 prompts for language arts, science, and social studies. This great bank of well written prompts supports cross curricular writing. WritetoLearn® scoring is aligned to the 6 Traits, which is widely used in Iowa schools. Teachers get wonderful class level and individual reports on student performance. Like our other Skills Iowa learning tools, teachers can use the reports to plan instruction to address student needs. Students need quick feedback to engage them in editing, rewriting and improving their skills. WritetoLearn® provides immediate feedback and specific, targeted instruction to students as they write. Pearson is committed to continuous improvement of this product, which is one of the reasons we were drawn to WritetoLearn®. If you decide to subscribe you will soon learn what an amazing tool WritetoLearn® is and how much support it offers teachers and students in the development of writing.

Electronic Scoring of Writing

Dr. Mark Shermis, whose research with the Hewlett Foundation we first saw several years ago, noted in a University of Akron publication, “After 50 years of writing research, we know that if you want to be a better writer, you need to write more. And the major impediment to better writing is that someone has to go through the essays that students create,” said Shermis, the principal investigator of the study. “My father was a high school English teacher. Every time he gave a writing assignment, he would come home with a stack 150 papers to grade. Usually he did this on a Friday, and when that happened, I knew our weekend was shot.” (University of Akron, 2012)

John O’Connor wrote in March of 2014 about Dr. Shermis’s work in the publication [State Impact](#), a reporting project of NPR member stations. “...Mark Shermis has studied the accuracy of automated essay scoring — computer programs which read essays and assign a score — in three trials. Shermis concluded the programs worked at least as well as human scorers in two of those trials.”

“An Australian trial of two automated essay scoring programs found machine-scored essays fell short of human grading on closed content driven writing prompts. But that trial used just one prompt and a small sample of essays.

“A second trial, sponsored by the William and Flora Hewlett Foundation, tested eight commercial automated essay scoring programs and one developed by a university lab. The trial gathered more than 22,000 essays from eight writing prompts spread across six states. The nine automated essay scoring programs performed on par with human scorers

“A third competition, this time public and online, drew 159 teams from around the world. Again, the top automated essay scoring programs performed as well or better than human graders.”

SKILLS IOWA CORNER

The last benchmarks of the year are just around the corner. The final math benchmark and the final reading benchmark both open Monday, April 28, and close Friday, May 23rd. Please make sure everyone takes those assessments so you have useful end-of-the-year data and can start planning for next fall. You can always find the benchmark dates on the home page of Skills Iowa. Go to www.skillsiowa.org and then look for the Calendar link.

QUOTES

“Write yourself. Invite children to do something you’re already doing. If you’re not doing it, ‘Hey,’ the kids say, ‘I can’t wait to grow up and not have to write, like you.’ They know. And for the short term and the long term, you’ll be doing yourself a favor by writing. All of us need it as a survival tool in a very complex world. The wonderful thing about writing is that it separates the meaningless and the trivial from what is really important. So we need it for ourselves and then we need to invite children to do what we’re doing. You can’t ask someone to sing a duet with you until you know the tune yourself.”

Donald Graves

“Writing is essential to communication, learning, and citizenship. It is the currency of the new workplace and global economy. Writing helps us convey ideas, solve problems, and understand our changing world. Writing is a bridge to the future.”

The National Writing Project, University of California, Berkeley

“There is no greater agony than bearing an untold story inside you.”

Maya Angelou

“You have to write the book that wants to be written. And if the book will be too difficult for grown-ups, then you write it for children.”

Madeleine L’Engle

***If you have any questions about the School Improvement Booster or suggested future topics,
please contact Susie Olesen at susie.olesen@isfis.net.***

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