Preparing Low-Income Middle and Secondary Students to Participate Effectively in Academic Discourse Through Writing

Franc Lacinski

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Abstract

“Preparing Low-income Middle and Secondary Students to Participate Effectively in Academic Discourse through Writing”

Author: Franc Lacinski, Thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Arts in English with a Concentration in Writing Studies, Montclair State University, 2010.

Students from low-income families often perform poorly on formal assessments in language arts. Examining data using the 2008-2009 State of New Jersey Department of Education School Report Cards, a comparison was made between low-income districts and affluent districts in three areas: High School Proficiency Assessment Language Arts Literacy Scores, SAT Verbal Scores and SAT Essay Scores. Students from low-income districts performed significantly lower in these areas than students from the higher income districts and from the average performance rates for the State of New Jersey. This lag in performance affects students’ choices for higher education, for job opportunities, as well as their abilities to communicate in writing, which is necessary in daily life.

Factors that impact this disparity in achievement include that students may not speak Standard English either because they or their parents are from another country or because few, if any, in the family have had formal education, which also affects vocabulary development. There may be a lack of resources available to them at home such as print material, technology and enrichment opportunities. The type and quality of writing instruction students receive and the demands and expectations that are presented to them by the schools they attend may not reflect high standards or rigor. Indicators of
this include large class sizes and students being placed in lower track classes where the content of instruction may be less than in other settings.

To address the needs of underprepared students, a comprehensive review was made of the available research on writing instruction to determine effective teaching methods that can help improve the skills of low-income middle and secondary students. An analysis of strategies was undertaken to find those practices that should be incorporated into a program of writing instruction.

From my experience and from the research I reviewed, if middle and secondary students who are from low-income backgrounds are to be prepared to participate effectively in academic discourse through writing, they need to be exposed to writing instruction that takes into account their backgrounds, skill levels and social and emotional needs. Authentic writing assignments from which students can understand their purpose help to develop students' competencies, as does the critical thinking needed in learning to present cohesive arguments. Direct instruction in writing helps build proficiency, along with the writing process when it is explicitly taught in steps. Teacher questioning and feedback are among the most powerful ways to improve student writing but these are skills that must be developed.

The practices that should be incorporated into an effective program of writing instruction according to Delpit, Hull, Tompkins and others include designing quality assignments which offer students meaningful ways to practice discourse, making instruction explicit through teaching skills, not in isolation, but as part of purposeful writing, providing comprehensive feedback on students' writing which goes beyond surface errors to address structure and content and ongoing professional development for
teachers in best practices in writing instruction. Finally, teachers must be aware of their attitudes toward the students they teach, realizing that poor grammar, lack of spelling skills or use of Non-standard English do not mean that students are lacking in intelligence or do not have valuable things to say. Therefore, a writing program that offers explicit instruction in conjunction with process writing, has assignments grounded in purpose and meaning as its foundation, aids teachers with professional development and recognizes the innate abilities of the novice writers would provide low-income students with the educational experiences necessary to advance their performance with academic discourse.
PREPARING LOW-INCOME MIDDLE AND SECONDARY STUDENTS TO PARTICIPATE EFFECTIVELY IN ACADEMIC DISCOURSE THROUGH WRITING

A THESIS

Submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements
For the degree of Master of Arts in English with a Concentration in Writing Studies

by
FRANC LACINSKI
Montclair State University
Montclair, New Jersey
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Copyright © 2010 by Franc Lacinski. All rights reserved.
This paper is dedicated to Abby Hersch who has taught me the most about education, learning and moving forward. With utmost respect and the highest form of gratitude – thank you.

To Dr. Emily Isaacs for her immediacy and expertise in offering me ideas to reshape my thinking about what can happen in a writing classroom.

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To Dr. Robert Whitney who challenged my thinking and introduced me to the idea of provocation to do just that.

To the members of the Elizabeth Board of Education and to the Elizabeth Public School District who continue to offer me new ways to challenge my interests in serving the students of the city of Elizabeth.
# Table of Contents

Abstract................................................................. i
Thesis Signature Page........................................... iv
Title Page............................................................... v
Copyright Page...................................................... vi
Acknowledgements............................................... vii
Table of Contents................................................. viii
Introduction......................................................... 1
The Societal Effects of Poverty on Students’ Performance........ 5
Factors that Impact the Development of Writing Proficiency..... 11
Examining Instructional Practices................................ 14
Developing a Pedagogy ........................................... 22
Transforming Writing Instruction............................. 29
Creating an Effective Writing Program......................... 44
Conclusion.............................................................. 55
Works Cited........................................................... 57
Appendix.................................................................... 61
Introduction

It is hard looking at people's lives. It's hard to closely examine one's own life, but when you are an educator it becomes your duty to look closely at the lives in front of you each day, as well as your own life. To begin with, teaching is not easy and it requires a certain magical combination of content knowledge, charisma, the ability to think on your feet, optimism and the notion that "we're all in this together." As a result of the No Child Left Behind legislation and current economic conditions, public school systems are under a microscope and with good reason. The reading and mathematics performance of students in the United States continues to drop in ranking as compared to other countries while the gap between the high school graduation and college completion rates of white students and minority students continues to exist and widen (Haycock, "All Students College and Career Ready").

Life in an urban school has heightened my awareness of the inequalities in the world. No one asks to be born poor or to be forced to deal with problems that create enormous difficulties at an early age. I am an eighth grade language arts teacher and many of my students are plagued by circumstances beyond their control -- and often they show up with the effects of these circumstances when they come to class. As teachers, we want them to pay attention and listen, follow directions and care, but it is not always easy for the most vulnerable of students. I believe that education will change students' lives, but it is a long time from eighth grade to adulthood and a lot can go wrong. And it is with the realization that many of my students are not performing in language arts at the same levels of achievement of their more affluent counterparts that I begin to question
what can be done to offer them the writing instruction they need to participate effectively in academic discourse.

Looking at the data from the State of New Jersey Department of Education School Report Card (NJDOE), certain trends become clear. Cities are given a District Factor Group (DFG) rating based on census data for six variables:

1) Percent of adults with no high school diploma
2) Percent of adults with some college education
3) Occupational status
4) Unemployment rate
5) Percent of individuals in living in poverty
6) Median family income.

Then they are given DFG ratings from A to J, with a rating of A being the lowest and J being the highest (NJDOE). Cities with a DFG of J have a population of well-educated citizens with a small percent of individuals living in poverty and median incomes in the upper quartile while cities with a DFG of A have citizens who are not as well educated, a much higher percentage of people living in poverty and median incomes in the lower quartile.

I examined data, using the 2008-2009 State of New Jersey Department of Education School Report Cards, from four counties in the state in different regions and compared cities with DFG’s of I or J with cities with a DFG of A in three areas: High School Proficiency Assessment Language Arts Literacy Scores, SAT Verbal Scores and SAT Essay Scores. Students from low-income districts performed significantly lower in these areas than students from the higher income districts and from the average
performance rates for the State of New Jersey. The data shows that there are disparities in these student groups based on income levels and highlights the need to examine current teaching practices in low-income districts in order to determine what is needed to improve achievement levels in the measures of literacy skills that are used as qualifiers for high school graduation and admission to higher education institutions.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>County, City and District Factor Group (DFG)</th>
<th>High School Proficiency Assessment Language Arts Literacy Scores</th>
<th>SAT Verbal Scores</th>
<th>SAT Essay Scores</th>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Essex County</strong></td>
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<tr>
<td>Newark DFG A</td>
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<td>357</td>
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<td>Barringer High School</td>
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<td>552</td>
<td>573</td>
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<td>Livingston Senior High School</td>
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<td><strong>Union County</strong></td>
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<tr>
<td>Elizabeth DFG A</td>
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<tr>
<td>Elizabeth High School</td>
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<tr>
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<td>3.5% Partial 96.5% Proficient</td>
<td>569</td>
<td>573</td>
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<tr>
<td>Westfield Senior High School</td>
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<td>South Brunswick High School</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Camden County</strong></td>
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<td>Camden City DFG A</td>
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<tr>
<td>Camden High School</td>
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<tr>
<td>Haddonfield Memorial High School</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>State of New Jersey</strong></td>
<td>16.5% Partial 83.5% Proficient</td>
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</table>

As students who are underprepared enter colleges and universities, they find that
they must take remedial courses to improve their skills. In “New Evidence on College Remediation,” Attewell et al. point out “Supporters of college remediation draw attention to the fact that students of color, students from less affluent families, and students for whom English is a second language are greatly overrepresented in remedial courses” (887). This reinforces the need for targeted interventions in literacy for students before they complete their secondary education, and with the use of information from state assessments, students’ weaknesses are apparent at early stages in their education. The challenge becomes to identify what programs and types of instruction will make a difference in their acquisition of skills.

As an English teacher with experience working in an urban public school district, I have begun to realize that what I am being asked to do in my classroom needs to be more effective. Because my students come from backgrounds that are the result of poverty, many do not succeed in school like their counterparts in more affluent districts. Educating other people’s children is a huge responsibility and it requires commitment and attention to finding ways to help our future generations. Educating children who are economically disadvantaged is an even greater responsibility, as public schools are the one system in our society that can offer the possibility of moving beyond poverty.

In order for students to be successful in school and college, they must be able to write clearly and at higher levels, moving beyond “proficient” status. Students must understand the connection between thinking and writing and how dependent this connection is for constructing new learnings. Students must be able to successfully engage in argument, demonstrate a fluency with Standard English that, when exhibited in writing, offers access to higher levels of education and a wider array of professional
opportunities and prepares them to participate in the literacies required for the twenty-first century (Common Core State Standards in English Language Arts). The importance of writing instruction, especially to economically disadvantaged students, is vital so that they may communicate effectively to meet the challenges of participating fully in society as professionals in the workplace and as informed citizens.

Writing can be a transformative act. But for some students, especially those who are academically underprepared, this experience is far from their reach. Many of these students sit in classrooms struggling with how to express their thoughts and ideas. They become frustrated as their awareness of their difficulties grows and a realization occurs of how their grades and choices in life are impacted. Often unable to articulate what their difficulties are or what questions they could ask to help them make meaning, they wait, sit and fall further and further behind. Whether they know it or not, they are waiting for someone – their teacher to come to them and show them what they need to do. What is needed is a curriculum that incorporates the findings of research on teaching writing to underprepared students, offers teachers avenues to improve their practices and pedagogies and provides students with instruction that incorporates developmental skills, explicit instruction in composition and process writing, imparting techniques that will transform their educational experiences and move them forward with confidence in their abilities to successfully write for high school and college.

**The Societal Effects of Poverty on Students’ Performance**

Teaching other people’s children is a complicated endeavor. In that sentence, the word to remember is “other.” To reinforce the separation of cultures and economic classes, a former language arts supervisor of mine used to say repeatedly, “They’re not
us. They're different.” He told us how the students were from lives with little structure, absent parents, living in crowded conditions, no medical care, poor nutrition and so on. Then a colleague gave me the article, “Understanding and Working with Students and Adults from Poverty” by Ruby Payne, a career educator who has dedicated her career to removing the obstacles to success caused by economic class differences. It shifted my perceptions about many of my students. As I read the article, I could see clearly that her findings could be seen in my classroom. Payne believes that in order to successfully work with students from generational poverty one must recognize that there are poverty-related behaviors that affect learning, that language issues can affect development of skills needed for success on standardized assessments and that in order to foster learning, direct instruction is needed to build cognitive structures (1).

It became clear that I needed to better understand my students’ backgrounds, their thought processes and, more importantly, how they perceived their places in the world. What I also needed to do was to extend to them in some way the hidden rules of the classroom and how understanding these rules could make them successful and prepare them for a better future. Payne states that in order to be successful working with students from generational poverty one must teach the hidden rules of the middle class that govern school and work. Hidden rules are defined as the unspoken clues that individuals use to indicate membership in a group. Students from generational poverty come with a completely different set of hidden rules and do not know the hidden rules of the middle class (1). Teaching these rules acknowledges that in order to really help my students I need to provide them with the language, oral and written, implied and explicit, required by an institutional educational setting. What is the real work of education? As an
educator, my job is to prepare all my students to develop the literacy skills they will need for high school, college and to make a living but I must acknowledge that this is affected by whom I teach.

In an urban classroom, the injustices of society are played out and students have to cope with an insufficiency of resources to meet their needs. It amazes me how resilient they appear, but in reality they know there are other people who have access to material conditions and basic necessities that, unfortunately, their families do not. To add differences of race and language further creates the divide between my students and their more affluent counterparts. For many, life is not fair because life is so hard.

I cannot change the inequities in the world. Their effects have the power to define who my students are and what futures they will be able to access. But I have to believe that I can make a difference as a teacher. Nelson Mandela said, “Education is the most powerful weapon which you can use to change the world.” The longer I work in public education, the more this quote resonates with me. My students need a weapon to fight against the stereotypes and judgments that are made about them. They need a weapon to fight against the poverty that claims generations and condemns them to substandard lives. It will be their success that has the power to disrupt people’s perceptions of them and for some, their own perceptions of who they are and their places in the larger world. How do I deliver this weapon to my students, give them ammunition and help them set their sights on a target? How do I teach through the politics of a government that relegates whole classes of people to lives of struggle, that has shaken the country’s belief in the public education system and has decided that the best way to improve education is through punitive measures? I believe that the only way to accomplish this tremendously
important goal is through the power of words, the ability to communicate in writing for the multiple purposes needed to live in our complicated society today.

We, as educators, must not pretend that there are no differences between students from low-income and minority families and from those who come from more privileged circumstances. The differences lie, not in abilities, but in opportunities. If public education is going to have a meaningful impact on the lives of its charges, teachers must provide ways to "rise up" intellectually so that students can develop a new paradigm for their lives. Only through a serious conscious effort on the part of educators to examine the writing pedagogy we deliver will this be realized. Something has to change. Public schools are social systems and to recognize that students from low-income backgrounds have different needs as students in order to become proficient in academic discourse is a politicizing attitude but one that is necessary if progress is to be made in closing the achievement gap between economically disadvantaged students and those from more affluent conditions. "To redesign social systems we need first to acknowledge their colossal unseen dimensions. The silences and denials surrounding privilege are the key political tools here" (McIntosh 6). We would like to believe that there is equal educational opportunity for all students and that they are all being offered quality instruction. What we are reluctant to believe is that students from low-income families need different instructional methods in order to promote success because, on some level, this appears to be prejudiced, even racist. However, different methods do not necessarily imply inferior methods.

Lisa Delpit claims that there is a culture of power with a set of rules that may not be apparent to those who do not have power ("The Silenced Dialogue" 282). She
believes that, “we must take responsibility to teach, to provide for students who do not already possess them, the additional codes of power” (“The Silenced Dialogue” 293). One aspect of those codes is the power of academic language.

Linda Christensen writes in *Reading, Writing, and Rising Up: Teaching About Social Justice and the Power of the Written Word*, that people are judged by their use of language and so the rules of Standard English must be considered. She writes of a student, “It’s the language of power in this country, and I would be cheating him if I pretended otherwise.” She continues to explain that:

...language functions as a gate-keeping system in our country. Who gets managerial jobs, who works at banks, who works at fast food restaurants, who gets into what college and who gets into college at all, are decisions linked to the ability to use Standard English. So how do we teach kids to write with honesty and passion about their world and get them to study the rules of the cash language?

I have come to believe that many teachers I have met and worked with feel that it is hopeless to try to teach their students the language needed to succeed in an academic setting. Delpit makes the point some educators feel that, “Although it is their job to teach literate discourse styles to all of their students, they question whether that is a task they can actually accomplish for poor students and students of color” (“Acquisition of Literate Discourse” 297). This attitude is reinforced by research such as that by James Paul Gee who purports that one cannot acquire a different discourse even with educational support, “Discourses are not mastered by overt instruction, but by enculturation (“apprenticeship”)
into social practices through scaffolded and supported interaction with people who have already mastered the discourse” (7).

Teachers feel that the students are handicapped by their families’ inability to use this discourse and by their lack of exposure to “proper English” in their communities. An additional factor is that many of the families in these communities do not speak English as the first language in the home. In Elizabeth, where I teach, 45% of the students come from homes where this is true (NJDOE). Teachers perceive the handicap to be insurmountable and so they apply a lesser standard to the written work they accept. I have begun to wonder, though, if this is not an outward response to the hidden, maybe unrealized, prejudice that students of color and poverty don’t need the language of academic discourse and as a result won’t have access to the power it confers.

The importance of my students and all students from low-income backgrounds achieving fluency in the discourse of academic English becomes a high-stakes undertaking. Previously, I thought the high stakes were for them to pass the state assessments. Now I see that the real issue is passing the barrier that is imposed by schools, universities and society for those who do not posses this discourse. Teachers must be willing to recognize that their students may suffer deficiencies in their language skills but they must not let that dissuade them from believing that their students can reach high levels of achievement in academic discourse.

I remember that James Baldwin said, “Teaching black children is a revolutionary act.” If I can teach my students, who come from backgrounds that are less than privileged, the importance of learning to write in Standard English (with all the requisite surface features in place), to develop the vocabulary inherent in the culture of power and
to comprehend the rules implicit in the society of achievement, then test scores should rise as an indicator of academic performance and I will be committing a revolutionary act.

**Factors that Impact the Development of Writing Proficiency**

To begin with, educators must recognize that children from low-income backgrounds are at disadvantages academically and this must be addressed if students are to have access to the same life opportunities as their middle-class counterparts. In order to make that happen, there has to be an understanding of the difficulties related to language acquisition, which becomes the foundation for literacy. Paul Tough, a writer for the New York Times Magazine, has called attention to issues concerning education, poverty and politics. In "What It Takes to Make a Student," he outlines some of the disparities that exist. Looking at research, he reports, "They found, first, that vocabulary growth differed sharply by class and that the gap between classes opened early. By age 3, children whose parents were professionals had vocabularies of about 1,100 words, and children whose parents were on welfare had vocabularies of about 275 words" (4). He continues, "... the size of each child's vocabulary correlated most closely to one simple factor: the number of words the parents spoke to the child. That varied greatly across the homes they visited, and again, it varied by class. In the professional homes, parents directed an average of 487 "utterances" – anything from a one-word command to a full soliloquy – to their children each hour. In welfare homes, the children heard 178 utterances per hour (4). The research that Tough references concluded that academic success was predicated on the language exposure a child received.

As students from low-income families progress through school, reading and
writing skills lag behind students from higher economic classes. “Prior research suggests three potential sources of these disparities in learning outcomes among students from these groups: (a) differences in students' access to material, social, and cultural resources outside of school (Bernstein, 1971; Bourdieu & Passeron, 1977; Entwistle, Alexander, & Olson, 2000; Lareau, 1987; Heath, 1983; Sewell & Hauser, 1975; Mayer, 1997), (b) differences in access to resources across schools (e.g., unequal funding, variation in teacher quality, etc.) (Ferguson, 1991), and (c) different academic experiences that students have within schools” (Carbonaro and Gamoran 802).

The educational experiences of students from low-income backgrounds are likely to be different because of the classes to which they are assigned. Carbonaro and Gamoran found that these students “…are more likely to be placed in lower ability groups and tracks (Oakes, 1985, 1990), and numerous studies indicate that students in lower-track classes tend to learn less than comparable students in higher tracks (Gamoran & Mare, 1989)” (802). This is due to instructional differences, which offer students in higher-track classes a more rigorous curriculum that stresses critical thinking over rote learning. (803).

While public education is free and available to all citizens, not all students have access to the same resources. Adam Gamoran, in “American Schooling and Educational Inequality: A Forecast for the 21st Century,” notes that “Resources available to children whose families have greater income and wealth - supplies, books, computers, a place to study, tutors, and so on - contribute to educational success” (143). Gamoran also points out that “children whose parents have lower levels of education themselves are at a disadvantage in the school system…Differences in habits, tastes, attitudes, preferences,
and language use are among the many cultural conditions that make it more difficult for students from disadvantaged families to succeed in school” (144). He reports that, “Students whose families own more books, subscribe to magazines and newspapers, visit libraries and similar enrichment opportunities perform better on cognitive tests, receive higher grades, and stay in school longer than do students whose families lack these resources” (144).

Zemelman et al. in *Best Practice: New Standards for Teaching and Learning in America’s Schools* look at some of the factors that impact student learning in urban schools. They note that student mobility and turnover has a negative effect both on students and teachers. Students who constantly move lose the value of effective programs and new students add additional burdens to teachers as they try to catch them up, thus slowing down the progress of the class (281). They also relate how class issues can impact what happens in a classroom. Since, by income alone, teachers are middle-class, they evoke certain class standards including the way they talk, recreational activities, social beliefs and beliefs about education. Teachers can feel that inner city students lack discipline and manners in their homes. “Some education writers and theorists have argued that only a skills-and-worksheet approach will succeed with minority disadvantaged children, because they are culturally different from white middle-class families” (283). They note that this promotes a cycle of failure for students because teachers perceive them to be lacking in control and expect them to behave and react poorly. As the children experience these attitudes from their teachers, they begin to develop negative feeling about themselves (283).
Teaching in an urban school, I realize that there are many problems we have to contend with in helping our students to learn and to achieve. We need to acknowledge that our students may have language development issues that hinder their writing, they may have different attitudes toward school and learning than we are accustomed to and they may struggle because of a lack of basic necessities and resources. These issues cannot be ignored and it makes teaching a very challenging job, but we need to find new ways to deliver better instruction and to provide more rigor and more consistency within the school day, helping our students to become skilled in all aspects of literacy. We especially need to find the most effective methods for teaching writing that can help low-income students access effective academic discourse and the successes associated with it.

**Examining Instructional Practices**

The two most common approaches to teaching writing are process writing, which focuses on planning and revision and the skills approach, which teaches specific topics in isolation of actual writing. In order to help low-income students make significant progress in academic writing, a single approach will not work. There has to a union of the two, explicitly expressing the importance of acquiring skills in order to use language in clear meaningful ways and to understand how to structure a composition through planning as well as how to improve it through revision. Students' ideas must be recognized and valued even if they are poorly expressed. While poor expression of those ideas cannot be accepted, it is an opportunity for the teacher to help develop skills and to articulate the concepts behind the writing process.

The way I am supposed to deliver the curriculum I teach does not stress the research findings that I have just discussed. The language arts literacy curriculum our
school district has adopted, which mirrors what is being taught in most middle and high
school language arts classes in New Jersey, relies heavily on the process writing
approach. It offers my students minimal direct instruction or explanation of why we use
process writing, nor is easily understandable information on how to perform each part of
the writing processes included. I know that this doesn’t give my students the help that
they need; they need explicit instruction and I believe that this is one of the factors that
explain the differences in test scores between low-income districts and higher-income
districts.

With the emphasis on process writing, some students who are academically
underprepared find the process approach leaves them frustrated, not knowing what
direction to take and wondering why the teacher doesn’t make things clear. My students
often feel that the first draft is the final draft. They have put effort into the work and
expect that to be accepted. They appear not to understand the reasons for revising but I
am beginning to believe that is because they don’t know what skills to apply to make
their work better. Emilie V. Siddle Walker in “Falling Asleep and Failure Among
African-American Students: Rethinking Assumptions About Process Teaching” uses the
phrase “worlds apart” to relate how students and teachers may view the same experience
with totally different reactions. She maintains there are “two assumptions at the heart of
writing process methodology: A belief that students’ expectations about learning do not
substantially differ from those of their teachers and a belief that teachers are generally
capable of understanding, viewing positively, and exchanging dialogue with all students”
(323). These beliefs illuminate why process writing can be problematic when teachers
are not cognizant of the learning styles and support systems needed by their students. All
students can benefit from process writing, but academically underprepared students need
unambiguous directions, skills that are embedded into the writing process as opposed to
being taught in isolation and clear communication from their teachers offering
suggestions to improve their writings. Most of all, students need to understand the
purpose for what they are doing and how it will make them better writers.

Peter Elbow puts forth an approach to writing using the voyage out method that
could encourage more direct collaboration between the student and teacher. Used in a
guided fashion, his loop process may help some students but it may also be frustrating to
others. “For one thing you probably have to throw more away. A generative process as
creative as this one will inevitably turn up more insights than you can logically or
comfortably fit in one piece of work. You will have to develop the strength to throw
away some good material. And when you figure out your final train of thought, you will
probably find some gaps you need to fill in” (76). This may be difficult for some
students who will have trouble discarding any of their writings and may be afraid that
they are losing important work that will add to their papers. Here is opportunity for the
teacher to work with students to decide what is important and what is not so important.
These decisions require a confidence in one’s judgment and many novice writers are in
short supply of that trait. It will take time, direct instruction and continued support to
help students practice the art of revision and own the ability to make decisions about their
writings.

African-American students value teachers who are directive and “in charge” of
their classes, according to Walker and my experience reflects that this is also true for the
students I teach who are from low-income backgrounds. Moreover, evidence exists that
when teachers fail to fulfill these expectations, students are actively resentful rather than passive in response (323). In many cases, students know that they need help in certain areas but do not know how to articulate what help they need or even how to begin to identify the problems in their writings. They expect the teacher to deliver what they require, in this case, ways to write better. When they are asked to work things out on their own or to work with others who may share the same inadequacies, they look for an expert, someone to help “fix” the problem and let them move on. This is not the case with the process approach classroom. “Thus, teachers turning questions back on students and/or giving suggestions rather than direct instructions could be construed by African American students as efforts to minimize rather than increase their learning” (323). My experience working with students who are from poverty reflects Walker’s point of view. However, I have worked with African-American students from privileged backgrounds who do not have the same reaction. They are willing to revise their work, have ideas about how to improve what they have written and are not impeded by surface errors that can obscure meaning. It seems that they have had different educational and life experience that enrich their writing, as is reflected in the research reviewed delineating the differences of students from disparate economic backgrounds.

To support low-income students, teachers need to demand high quality work and maintain the high expectations found in higher-income schools. In the process classroom, many students who are not a part of the “culture of power” find themselves wanting to be given specific steps to improve their writing. This fact needs to be acknowledged by teachers of writing so they are able to provide students, especially our most underprepared students, with the explicit instruction needed to allow them to
exercise the potential power of words, ideas and thoughts and to have what Keith Gilyard addresses when he quotes Geneva Smitherman from her book *Students’ Right*,
“Communicative competence, quite simply, refers to the ability to communicate effectively. At this point, however, all simplicity ends. For to be able to speak or write with power is a very complex business, involving a universe of linguistic choices and alternatives” (640). To supply students with the tools needed to make powerful linguistic choices is the aspiration for our instruction.

The classrooms in our schools have always been filled with students who struggled with literacy. Students who were unable to express their thoughts in writing or didn’t see the value of literature didn’t last too long. In the past, factories were able to absorb them and they were able to earn a comfortable living. Today, those jobs have disappeared. I frequently pass the site of a General Motors plant where many of my high school companions went to work. The plant closed, the building was demolished and weeds are obscuring what was once a vital workplace. It becomes imperative for students to possess the literacy skills that will make finding a career possible, yet too often we fail. Mike Rose makes this clear,

Every day in our schools and colleges, young people confront reading and writing tasks that seem hard or unusual, that confuses them, that they fail. But if you can get close enough to their failure, you’ll find knowledge that the assignment didn’t tap, ineffective rules and strategies that have a logic of their own; you’ll find clues, as well, to the complex ties between literacy and culture, to the tremendous difficulties our children face as they attempt to find their places in the American educational system (8).
Perhaps this is it. Perhaps as educators, we do not want to look too closely at what is not working in our lessons. To consider what may lie behind these failures are issues that have to deal with race and class and that makes many uncomfortable. There is nothing simple about how students learn. We need to examine our hidden assumptions and the values we hold about our teaching. We need to be clear about how we want our student to write and what we want them to read and comprehend. We need to recognize the potential of all of our students to be able to use language as a tool to shape their lives.

We need to realize that we possess complex experiences that make us who we are and it takes the will of good educators, those who are not afraid to be oppositional in their thinking, to find the best way to use those experiences to fulfill the promise of literacy for every student. That should be the focus of our public school system.

Engaging in a deeper level of thinking about the subject that I teach, I want a new way of understanding writing practices and how they can create an educational path to a life out of poverty while recognizing that the influence of poverty is a large obstacle. How do I get my students to write in Standard English without stopping the flow of ideas? Does the traditional public school model fit the educational needs of students from poverty and with different language and literacy skills? Many students speak another language but do not write or read it and so they do not have literacy structure in their native language. My task is to examine new ways for students to have ownership over all the types of writing that are required as part of the middle and high school curriculum. I would like to teach students to use specific writing strategies to help them independently create meaning through their compositions, stories and essays. These would incorporate instruction on how to write complex sentences, paragraphs that are full
of detail and compositions that hook the reader’s initial interest with genuine purpose for writing. Generating questions about text, making inferences and summarizing would offer students additional purposeful ways to write. These strategies would show students that writing is an activity that requires full attention, thinking, communicating, discussing, arguing, evaluating and making decisions. Presenting students with new ways of learning vocabulary need to be included as part of these strategies so that they can develop powerful word choices, which will enhance their writing.

Many teachers are poorly prepared to give instruction in teaching writing to middle school and high school students unless they are English majors. Teachers who receive elementary school certification may graduate from college without ever taking a writing course. One way this deficiency is addressed is through the twenty hours of professional development that all teachers in New Jersey must complete each year. In practice, this is not always a valuable use of time and resources. My experience as a teacher, and speaking to other language arts teachers across the state, shows that professional development is usually in the form of one- or two-hour lectures or one day workshops, with little or no additional time scheduled for teachers to implement what they have learned and come together again to discuss the effectiveness of the instruction. Topics usually focus on process writing since it aligns with the state standards and is highlighted in research on best practices. The delivery of information in these workshops includes a volume of information but with only a cursory examination of what process writing is. Teachers are not afforded the time to experience what lies behind the process as it would be taught to their students.
Consideration is not given to the possibility that pure process writing may not be the most effective instructional practice for teachers to follow in order to advance their students’ writing performance when they are underprepared. What is needed is an examination of what research has shown to work for underprepared students, how this information can be translated into instructional practices that include an understanding of the factors, social, emotional, societal, attitudinal and pedagogical, that affect students’ abilities to learn to write.

Hull et al. in, “Seeing the Promise of the Underprepared” state that there “has been a long history in American education of perceiving and treating low-achieving children as if they were lesser in character and fundamental abilities” (6). The work of an educator is to see beyond labels and stereotypes and to address the educational needs of the students. We need to be able to understand our students to discover their vulnerabilities, learn about their histories through interaction and by simply by letting them tell their stories. “This is also how we conceive of teacher education, as the practice of developing ways to see the connection between the cognitive and the social – by engaging in the kind of inquiry that leads one to trace the connections between the mind of the student, the classroom, and the community beyond (Hull et al. 7). If we, as educators, are able to do this, then it becomes possible to review what we know about our students, their abilities, the curriculum we teach, our pedagogies and our attitudes in order to realize a program that recognizes the potential of our students, addresses their weaknesses and strengths as learners and writers and delivers instruction with approaches that make academic discourse accessible to all.
Developing a Pedagogy

Students from low-income families often perform poorly on academic writing tasks and the achievement gap for low-income students is not closing when graduation rates, SAT scores, and state assessment scores are examined. Strategies to improve achievement have concentrated on basic skills remediation and since there is a finite amount of time in the school day, if students are enrolled in basic skills courses or have targeted basic skill interventions, they are not taking higher order electives. This presents a conflict for the schools, the teachers and the students themselves. Students who need writing skills strengthened are not necessarily deficient in their abilities to think critically, determine the thesis of an argument or present an imaginative story. When they are assigned to classes that are solely based on skills acquisition, their development of the kinds of discourse needed for academic success is stunted. What is done, ostensibly in the best interest of the student, can end up hurting him or her and, more importantly according to statistics, is not helping. Unfortunately, students may not be able to advocate for themselves nor do they have family members to do so for them, and so their educational experiences become limited, as do their abilities to be successful in a society where effective writing and use of language offers a competitive edge.

James Baldwin, in "A Talk to Teachers" discusses the purpose of education:

The paradox of education is precisely this - that as one begins to become conscious one begins to examine the society in which he is being educated. The purpose of education, finally, is to create in a person the ability to look at the world for himself, to make his own decisions, to say to himself this is black or this is white, to decide for himself whether there
is a God in heaven or not. To ask questions of the universe, and then learn to live with those questions, is the way he achieves his own identity. But no society is really anxious to have that kind of person around. What societies really, ideally, want is a citizenry which will simply obey the rules of society. If society succeeds in this, that society is about to perish. The obligation of anyone who thinks of himself as responsible is to examine society and try to change it and to fight it - at no matter what risk. This is the only hope society has. This is the only way societies change.

Schools are microcosms of the larger culture and, as a result, offer us valuable information on the experiences of our students. Karolyn Tyson investigated the role of culture and achievement as it pertains to African American students and found that, “The more closely the students’ homes reflected the mainstream culture, the greater the students’ initial advantage in school; familiarity with the valued cultural codes (e.g. Standard English) determined the relative ease with which students could conform to school norms and expectations. Conversely, the greater the difference in culture between students’ homes and school, the greater the disadvantage the students faced, for they must first learn and adapt to the new codes and expectations” (327). It takes deep and unflinching reflection to examine your attitudes as a teacher of minority or culturally diverse students and you must be willing to understand how those perspectives inform your instruction and your perception of your students’ abilities to succeed in becoming accomplished writers.

I often hear other teachers talk about what “these kids” need. Most often the conversations revolve around discipline and punishment. Rarely, if ever, do they include
discussions of pedagogy. At my school, we are required to join committees. The largest committee is the discipline committee. One of the smallest is the curriculum and instruction committee. In “The Genteel Unteaching of America’s Poor,” Kylene Beers relates how well meaning administrators and teachers speak about “those” kids. They deliver instruction that involves low-level assignments, little discussion, and a classroom environment that keeps students safely in their seats; the rationale for this program is that “those” students need structure and can’t handle anything else (2).

By adopting classroom practices such as these, students are subjected to a controlled environment that reinforces the idea that they are lacking in ability, affecting self-esteem and often triggering more disruptive behavior. Discussing the difficulties in helping minority students negotiate between a strong sense of self and conforming to the norms of a society where they are “others” Karolyn Tyson comments, “As some have warned, positioning minority students for mainstream success requires a delicate balance of explanation and affirmation, for without this balance, there is danger of sending messages of cultural deviance to students” (340). An effective pedagogy, one that is founded on the premise that students have language ability but are not yet demonstrating proficient academic discourse, would offer high quality assignments and instruction that scaffold skills while allowing opportunities for thinking critically and for the rich use of language.

Why do my students write the way they do? For some, they enter the world of the classroom poorly prepared. Their language development is deficient and they struggle from day one to gain footing in a new disciplined way of life: school. Many times the classrooms are overcrowded with class sizes in the younger grades of over twenty-five
students, making it difficult to individualize instruction. There may be behavior problems with children who are not used to the structures and rules of the classroom. Even for seasoned teachers, these realities create enormous challenges and often they come up short in helping each student. These issues create disturbances to the process of learning and leave teachers throwing their hands up in exasperation or prayer.

I have been trying to help my students by expanding my pedagogy to include more explicit instruction that teaches skills including sentence structure, paragraph development, composition organization, editing principles and building vocabulary to specifically enrich writing and modeling the power of stories expressed and shared, but I need to do more. Perhaps I need to look at a much larger view. What kind of classroom can I create that will wake up the potential I know exists in my students and open up new possibilities for me as a teacher?

The way educators communicate to their students may deny them access to fully understanding the academic complexities of the “culture of power.” While not a conscious decision by teachers, often their directions, instructions and comments are based on assumptions of what students should understand, not what they actually do. Word choice, sentence length, voice tone and impatience can obscure the information we are trying to convey. By doing so, we have a population that does not fully integrate their intellectual gifts with the academic outpouring that is taking place in classrooms where the students can be defined as “other” because of their race, cultural origins or income level. There appears to be a profound difference between what our education system purports to offer and reaching one’s full potential. Delpit argues that what needs to change is the way educators communicate to their students. She puts forward that
explicit instruction needs to be presented to those students who do not share the “culture of power” (“The Silenced Dialogue” 287). Students from impoverished backgrounds need this instructional style to help them develop strong writing and reasoning skills, which are the foundation of academic discourse, propelling their own successes. The writings of Delpit lead me to clarify my thinking about my classroom practices and resulted in adapting my instruction to embed a strong skills-based component as part of my pedagogy and in support of the process writing that is demanded by the curriculum.

I believe that one way to provide my students with explicit exemplars of excellent writing is through reading. With my students, I have told them that our reading and writing need to go together. I want them to write while they are reading and read while they are writing. I started using close reading techniques with my students which include asking them to interact with the text through summarization, making self-connections with the text, asking questions about what they have read and making predictions. I want them to be more active participants while they are reading. There has been resistance and students ask me, “Why can’t we just read?” I tell them we cannot go back to reading where we just let our eyes pass over the words and have little understanding. They feel the words are just words but I want them to understand that for writers, words are more than just words. They are what change people’s ideas about their relationships, their thoughts, and the entire world, past, present and future. We need the words of others to help us consider our actions and to consider if we need to adjust our own thinking about what we do. With practice, and as resistance to something unfamiliar fades, students begin to see that reading offers them experiences that can inform their writings and allows them to feel confidence in their abilities to comprehend text to enhance their
thinking. As a teacher, connecting reading and writing has enormous possibilities to transform our experiences we have with our students and transform experiences our students have with writing and language.

Delpit and others advocate incorporating more direct instruction in the skills needed to write proficiently in Standard English. However, this is challenging as many of my students write in Non-standard English and requiring Standard English seems to give them another layer of anxiety and fear that what they write will not be correct. So, this fear stops writing. Perhaps students who could go back and forth between Standard English and Non-standard English would be more powerful writers and experience more success. Perhaps it is all the emphasis on what is right and what is wrong that creates a world of fear about doing the wrong thing. This insistence on writing one way and using grammar rules is also a way to control behavior and remind students that they are “wrong.” The reality, though, is that academic discourse requires Standard English and to ignore teaching its rules and structures would penalize students as they move on in their education. Here, again, sensitivity toward students’ ideas and thinking, explicit instruction and pedagogical awareness of the needs of underprepared students is necessary in order to properly prepare them for academic success.

We need to remember that being able to express our thoughts using words is of great value and great importance. So, the pedagogy I am advocating should be about the power of words; it is about having students engage in dialogue, thoughts, ideas and being able to create self-empowerment through their abilities to write, availing opportunities for higher education and careers which can change their economic status in society. As teachers, we need to create a classroom experience that recognizes that what we do, each
day, has the ability to transform and shape new identities for our students through giving them the tools for academic discourse.

In order to prepare students to be fully realized in society, they must be given full access to education. In Paulo Freire’s The “Banking” Concept of Education, he discusses two very different forms of education, banking concept and problem-posing concept. Freire uses the term banking concept as a way to explain how teachers see themselves apart from their students and their students apart from the world. The teacher is preserving the idea that students need to do as the teacher says and remember their facts in order to find their places in the world. He offers us the “problem-posing” concept where students are in a conversation and in a state of questioning what they are learning and see themselves as contributors in forging a new world. They see themselves as being able to help transform the world. They experience having a voice and are active participants in their educational experiences. Through this process of engagement, students will see themselves as being able to change the world. It is this type of revolutionary act that Freire calls education the practice of freedom and it is with a pedagogy that recognizes and respects the innate intelligence of students and develops their writing skills, heightening their experiences in literacy, that teachers can begin to affect their success.

The task now is to begin to outline what this pedagogy will involve. I know that I believe students should use writing as a means to examine issues of social justice and the concept of truth in order to engage in ideas that interest them and that give them choice in what they are learning. Students should question the collective stories of our histories and cultures, including the stories of the cultures from where they come using writing as
a way to express what they feel about who they are and what they represent. The hope is that they will be willing to struggle to learn to be better readers because of what meaning the words can hold for them and that they will be willing to put words on paper that express their thoughts and opinions without fear of being right or wrong.

What experiences should be offered to students? What opportunities should provided in the classroom? What materials should be used? What anticipation is there for successes and difficulties? How will students react to a learning experience that will be different from what they know and are comfortable with (even in failure)? I know a pedagogy needs to be developed that will help students believe in the power of words and the power of story, understanding that they can use writing to affect their lives in a positive way. To have the skills necessary for academic discourse, to present and support an argument, to write with conviction and passion, is to prepare them for the larger world in which they must live.

Transforming Writing Instruction

The core curriculum content standards for New Jersey, which are the basis for the curricula of most school districts, are based on guidelines from The National Council for Teachers of English (NCTE). Stated in “NCTE Beliefs about the Teaching of Writing,” is that “Everyone has the capacity to write, writing can be taught, and teachers can help students become better writers” (1). They believe that students need many opportunities to write and must understand the various purposes of writing. They also believe that students need to understand that writing is a process and have experience using the stages of the writing process to produce texts. Students must be aware and have the practice of what writers do from pre-writing strategies, organizing information, revising and editing
and ways to evaluate finished products. Beyond this, NCTE believes that students must understand that writing is a tool for thinking and that writing is a way to get ideas, to clarify thinking (3). The goals outlined by NCTE are what teachers of English strive for in our educational practices but we must make sure all students can write and think at this level. The issue becomes how do teachers present instruction that engages students, helps them to think critically and enables them to express those thoughts in writing? In order for teachers of underprepared students to meet these goals, several realizations must occur. Teachers must make sure they are educated in composition theory and research and know how to turn these into practice through explicit instruction for their students. They must understand the writing process as it relates to students who struggle with a command of Standard English and who are often frustrated by their lack of understanding of what is wanted in their writings.

Then, there must be an examination of one’s beliefs as a teacher and one’s expectations of the students. If there is one thing I know for sure, it is that students understand their abilities. They are aware of what they know and what they do not know. They understand that they have difficulty understanding their readings and how hard it is to write a grammatically correct sentence that expresses their thinking. As educators, we need to be able to get closer to these understandings, acknowledge them and help students find ways that will allow them to experience success and strengthen their skills.

Teachers of underprepared students can find that they are engaged in a struggle to accept the students they teach and realize they must change their perceptions of what is possible for them. In “Diving In: An Introduction to Basic Writing,” Mina P. Shaughnessy outlines four stages that reflect on the teaching experiences of English
teachers in remedial classrooms. Guarding the Tower is the first stage where the teacher does what he or she can to protect the school and himself or herself from those who do not belong to this community of learners. It is at this stage that the instructor learns of the gross inadequacy of his or her students, uncovering of the lack of students’ abilities to communicate in an acceptable academic style. Slowly, by examining the writing of these students, the teacher realizes that there are intelligent ideas expressed within the errors both structural and grammatical (234).

The second stage, Converting the Natives, finds the teacher visualizing his or her students as needing to be filled with knowledge. The teacher believes implicitly in the value of what he or she has to impart and does not consider how this information relates to the students. It is here that teachers find that in teaching writing the simplest of ideas and concepts are more layered and challenging for the students who sit in front of them (235).

This leads to the third stage, Sounding the Depths, where the teacher is able to look at his or her students and their writings more closely and also to look at himself or herself as a writer. He or she gains “a deeper understanding of this behavior called writing and of the special difficulties his or her students have in mastering the skill” (236).

The final stage, Diving In, is one where the teacher “must now make a decision that demands professional courage – the decision to remediate himself to become a student of new disciplines and of his students themselves in order to perceive both their difficulties and their incipient excellence” (238). It is here where the work ahead is recognized and that to not go forward and try to instruct students who are lacking in
academic language would go against all of one's beliefs about what it means to be an educator.

Every teacher who is responsible for educating underprepared students must examine where they are in relation to Shaughnessy’s stages but this requires an awareness and introspection that does not always occur. It takes a willingness to confront inadequacies in one’s teaching style, in the pedagogy on which one has always relied and in the curriculum that one is required to deliver. In my own practice, a radical shift in perspective was needed in order to stop blaming the students for their inadequacies and to find my role in their failure to write to the demands of academic rigor. Once we are clear about our own attitudes toward our students and our work in teaching them the writing needed for academic discourse, we can begin to delineate what we need to teach and determine how to best deliver that instruction.

Underprepared students are often placed in remedial classes in order to help build the literacy skills needed to succeed in higher education. Even if the class is not officially recognized as remedial, when the majority of students are functioning below grade level, as is the case with many of my classes, the objectives of the class begin to emerge as developmental. This usually means instruction that teaches skills in isolation rather than in context and work that is more drill in nature rather than meaningful assignments that challenge the students’ abilities. It is important to teach skills and to recognize the weakness that students have, but to transform their language arts experience to one of rote learning is not only detrimental, historically it has not shown to improve the writings that students must master for high school and college.
One example of a program that integrates explicit skills instruction with rigorous assignments that engage students in higher level thinking and writing is detailed in “Changing the Model: Working with Underprepared Students” by Griffith et al. who highlight the work of Project Bridge, a program designed to help remedial students prepare to do academic work. The goals of the program are for students: to understand and use school language and to perform school tasks, to approach new information analytically, to make explicit connections between ideas, and between those ideas and one’s experience and to participate in the academic community. “We do not claim to teach students to talk or think. We do claim to show students who certainly know how to think and speak to utilize these abilities in the academic setting” (4).

The program consists of four instructional strategies. Student-centered classrooms allow that students’ needs come first in the classroom and all students are given the opportunity and help to make educational progress. The Primacy of Spoken Language stresses the importance and value of the language of everyday to access the language of the academy (3). Minority Group Culture is incorporated by including aspects of minority groups’ language or culture (5). Information About the World is an area that focuses on delivering content knowledge in all disciplines. “Inherent in these classes is the notion that reading and writing are communication skills best learned in the process of communicating genuine information and ideas – that is, content. Ideas are interesting to all people, all people have ideas, and it is these ideas, which motivate them to read, write and compute in the first place” (6).

A program like this that acknowledges the value of students’ experiences, cultures and language, provides a strong point of departure for students to use knowledge with
which they are familiar as they move to toward meeting the demands of higher education. Centering the writing process on what the students know and can relate to creates possibilities for those moments when breakthroughs can occur and students begin to own their writing, including a willingness to change and improve it. In doing so, a community of learners can be built offering support that is an integral part of student success. This is not often experienced in traditional classroom settings but if we are to reinvent instructional practices to benefit our most vulnerable students, then we must consider how to make our classrooms communities where success is the standard and everyone can write effectively.

At the start of the school year, the majority of my students usually seem to be unprepared to learn. This is exhibited through their attitudes and the postures they take when sitting at their desks; many slump and rest their heads on their arms. They feel that it is okay to talk while they are working, particularly when they are writing. They do not talk about the assignment, but what happened the day before or what would happen at lunch or some other time during the day. It is as if they believe they could exist in two parallel universes and have both thought patterns coalesce and be able to deliver to me their best work.

It seems to me that the first step to help my students would be to instruct them on how to become a student. One way to do this is to introduce them to the concept that writing is a way to be an active learner. In the introduction to *The Thinker's Guide to How to Write a Paragraph: The Art of Substantive Writing*, Paul and Elder write, “Most people realize that learning to write is “among the most important skills a student can learn.” But far fewer realize that writing is also the key to the acquisition of content
itself, it is "the mechanism through which students learn to connect the dots in their knowledge." Far too few realize that for students to learn, "they must struggle with the details, wrestle with the facts, and rework raw information and dimly understood concepts into language they can communicate to someone else." In other words, "if students are to learn, they must write." Conveying this understanding to students, modeling it for them and making it a part of one's instructional array, would initiate a key step to advance the acquisition of the kind of discourse they need through the continuation of their education.

Many students reach the eighth grade with certain behaviors, learned behaviors that are not going to help them be successful. I need to teach them and inspire them through higher expectations starting with the expectations of the classroom. They would have to be prepared with pens, pencils and notebooks. They would need organizational skills and they would need to understand and agree to the rules of the classroom. They would need to be willing to be successful. They would need to articulate what the definition of being successful is and to understand what that looks like, who represents success and create a road map to get there. They would need a teacher that would be part cheerleader, part advisor and one who would be able to find the gaps in their learning and understand how to fill in those gaps, building a stronger foundation. This is an enormous task but with reflection, planning, organization, commitment and the help of others, it can be done.

When I present a writing assignment to my students, the first response is "How do I start?" It is easy to become frustrated, but the truth is many students who are academically underprepared do not know. It is not that they do not have anything to say,
but their confidence levels regarding their abilities are low and they need constant reinforcement that what they have to say is worthy of writing down on paper. I believe this is the best place to start to transform our students’ thinking about writing. An atmosphere needs to be created where students can begin to learn that what they have to say is valuable, not only to themselves but also to others around them. They need to develop a muscle that works this confidence and they must experience even the smallest of successes to create others that will allow them to add to their repertoire of writing accomplishments.

In “For the Sake of Argument,” Hernandez et al. describe how several key literary practices can help students develop confidence in their abilities and improve their thinking about writing. They focus on the students at View Park Preparatory High School in South Los Angeles where half the population is eligible for free or reduced price lunch. The program they discuss includes the use of personal reflections that help students connect to the material via their personal experiences. The use of Socratic discussions helps develop and shape their critical thinking skills. Framed by an essential question, participants get the experience of responding to inquiry and developing ideas. Also, the use of essential questions provides the parameters needed for students to stay on topic and, to again, shape their arguments. (2). The purpose behind this program is to help students develop their thinking skills and to be able to make connections to and add to the ideas presented, giving them something to write about and something to say in their writings. The program gives students rigorous assignments to work on while teaching them how to think about the content of their writing.
This type of clear directed instruction is what is needed in order for students to meet the demands of academic work. Teaching students that their thinking is valuable, that it can be focused and can inform their writing is a powerful strategy that is not often employed. “Basing adolescent literacy on critical thinking represents a radical departure from tradition, particularly for students performing below grade level. But the urgent need to improve the success rates of low-income students in high school and college demands radical changes in our expectations and in the way we support these students” (Hernandez et al. 4).

From this starting point, teachers need to respond to student writing, asking questions that show an interest in what the student has written and also to create a way for the student to delve deeper into his or her thinking to provide more information to clarify and strengthen what has been composed. It requires a digging of sorts, like an archaeological expedition where the student goes looking to find what he or she does not yet know, but encouraged and motivated, continues to mine his or her mind to new levels of discovery and understandings. This is where teachers’ written comments have the power to illuminate and to strengthen students’ writing abilities.

There are unique characteristics of students in an urban classroom, particularly language development. In such settings, many students have poor vocabularies and have little reinforcement in matters of literacy from home. Are the children smart? Yes, but their literacy skills may be underdeveloped and they may lag behind because their educational progress has been stymied by factors out of their control. In many urban schools, it is hard to attract specialists to teach writing. Many teachers in middle school have a kindergarten to grade eight certification and know little about teaching writing or
understand the demands of treating each piece of writing as an opportunity for improvement. For many, vague comments and question marks to indicate a lack of understanding fill the margins. Teachers will write single words such as "good," "strengthen," or "revise" next to passages and these remarks are sincerely meant to help students. These responses, due to their lack of clarity and direction, leave students frustrated and unable to take the next step. The teachers have not yet developed the explicit skills they need in order to provide their students with the necessary information to advance their writing to the next level.

Teachers must provide comments that do more than acknowledge good passages, correct surface errors or point out what is wrong without suggestions for improvement. In “Investigating the process approach to writing instruction in urban middle schools” Patthey-Chavez et al. explore student-teacher interaction through the comments written by teachers to help move their students further along in learning to be better writers. Their findings promote the use of quality feedback in the early stages of the writing process. When students receive feedback on content rather than surface errors, writing improves and the improvements are noticeable. Their findings, however, show that teachers do not always provide written comments that help students to further their abilities to express their ideas (474). It would seem that teachers need professional development to improve the type of written feedback they produce so that students can use the information to develop their thinking about their compositions and about the value of the revision process to strengthen their communication of ideas.

The teaching of the process writing approach is an arduous endeavor that requires educators to commit the time to help their students learn and understand the elements that
make up writing in stages. "From a process perspective, writing development involves three key processes: (1) planning, (2) transforming ideas into language and its orthographic representation, and (3) rewriting text to improve it (Berninger, Fuller & Whitaker, 1996)" (463). The goal of this approach is for students to have numerous opportunities to refine their thinking through the refinement of their writing. It is at these stages where the use of teacher feedback, teacher's written comments and the usefulness of those comments can help foster new thinking by students about their writing as a direct result of those remarks. "It is a key site of knowledge construction between expert and novice, a time when teachers are most likely to provide explicit, form focused, and individualized instruction to student writers" (463). I believe this is imperative if students are to improve as writers. However, the dynamics of the classroom and the demands of curriculum can thwart one's efforts. Issues including classroom management, class size and required assessments often derail the good intentions of the teacher to provide meaningful feedback.

As educators, when our written comments are received by the students it becomes necessary to sit with them and go over our findings of what would strengthen a piece of writing. Even if a teacher writes clear concise comments, it does not mean the students will read the comments and, in the case when they do read the comments, will be able to understand what the teacher is expressing. Written feedback means very little to students unless the message to be delivered is explicit and clearly understood. One way to make sure that writing performance is enhanced through feedback is time spent in conferencing with the student where verbal interaction can clarify comments.
Here, the conferencing between teacher and student and the opportunity to strengthen this special relationship is key to encouraging and motivating student writers. However, to make this happen requires the careful training of staff on how to provide meaningful feedback with professional development that helps teachers learn to offer students the interventions needed to give them the information required to create better writing. Quality feedback and the relationship that it can foster between student and teacher is one the most effective methods that can help prepare low-income middle and secondary students for writing successful academic papers.

Teachers are not the only ones who are looking at students’ papers. An advantage that students in middle-income homes have is that their parents may review their children’s work and have the education to make value judgments about what they find. The urban classroom is different than the suburban classroom where parents can be more involved and many are better educated. When a student brings home a paper, suburban parents may read the paper and judge the comments written by the teacher as helpful to their child or not. E-mail may be forwarded to the teacher for more feedback and the conversation is extended and meaning is demanded. For many students in the urban setting, there is little parent involvement and for second language learners, many parents feel vulnerable when speaking to a teacher; perhaps they do not speak English or do not want to call attention to their legal status in the United States. There are cultural differences where the parent sees the teacher as “all knowing and knows best.” This is an obstacle that can create inequities for students as teachers may not feel that they are accountable to parents or guardians and so do not expend the time and attention needed to make comments effective.
So what we are left with is a vulnerable population who need to be educated by skilled teachers and we need to find new ways to retain those teachers by offering methods to deal with classroom management issues, ongoing professional development, mentoring and exemplars on practices that will aid this population. What works in a suburban classroom can work in an urban classroom, but the teachers need more help, not one-shot workshops where teachers leave with a binder filled with reproducibles. If teachers thought about it, looking at the binder and all that paper is probably exactly what urban students feel when they look at the comments on their compositions. They are left feeling overwhelmed and struggling to find where to begin; the easiest response is to not attempt change at all.

One caution about teacher feedback is that when students receive papers from a teacher with red markings all over the work they may have struggled with to communicate their thinking about a topic, they can easily get frustrated. It becomes important to praise students’ work when it is good and to write positive comments on every piece of writing in order to improve the compositions but also to increase students’ self-esteem (Bardine et al. 101).

As we examine writing from underprepared students and the thinking it represents, we can find difficulty in understanding the students’ perspectives and interpretations, often labeling them as misguided or just plain wrong. Hull et al. in, “Seeing the Promise of the Underprepared,” describe Mike Rose’s remedial writing class where college students were asked to read the poem, “And Your Soul Shall Dance” by Garrett Kaoru Hongo. Students were asked to interpret the poem, line by line. As students were not giving the expected responses, Rose met with a student, Robert, and
helped him express his thinking about the poem. In understanding the student’s reasoning, “we will intersect socio-economic, cognitive and textual information, bringing these disparate sources together to help us understand Robert’s interpretation of certain sections” (Hull et al. 9). Through questioning, Rose is able to elicit responses from Robert that show he is framing his responses in relation to his own background and has made connections with what he has experienced to what the character in the poem is experiencing. It is here that Rose was able to differentiate the interpretations of the poem by students educated in a traditional English classroom and Robert who was not.

The teacher benefits from understanding these unconventional readings and, through questioning, can also comprehend the source of the student’s findings and beliefs. From this understanding, the teacher then shepherds underprepared students into the world of academic writing giving them the experience and exposure of interpretation and backing up their thinking with what they know and also what they do not know. It requires teachers to make a shift in their thinking about these students and how to look more closely at their experiences, backgrounds and expectations in order to help them integrate more successfully in the world of the classroom.

Students need opportunities to express their ideas in meaningful ways and authentic writing activities offer students who need intervention the opportunity to think about their words. However, struggling writers need structured lessons on writing in order to make progress. Gail E. Tompkins in, “Struggling Readers are Struggling Writers, Too,” chronicles an intervention program for struggling readers that focuses on extra writing instruction. A diverse group of seventh grade students were exposed to a program developed by teachers that offered students authentic reading and writing
activities together with structured lessons about reading and writing skills in order to significantly raise these struggling students' achievement levels (177). Many of the students were apprehensive about writing and some just did not like to write. Throughout the semester, students became more involved participants in class as they learned that writing had a purpose – that they had a voice – that their writing can make a difference (180). Students developed more enthusiasm and confidence as writers through the use of the writing process and the generating of more ideas, improved organization, better control of language and style and improved mechanics.

Tompkins focused on five aspects of the intervention program: students learned about the writing process and how to use the steps of the writing process to draft and refine writing, students participated in writing workshops in order to practice the skills and strategies they were learning, a special chair was set up in the classroom – the author’s chair – and students sat in the chair to share their published writings, students were taught mini lessons on writing skills and other written language concepts, support and guidance was provided for the students as the teacher demonstrated and modeled the writing process and strategies writers use. The purpose of the intervention program was for the struggling readers to become better writers and, as a result, become more powerful communicators. Tompkins also lists the discoveries she made at the end of the semester some of which were that struggling writers have limited vocabularies, struggling writers don’t know or use the writing process, struggling writers do not spell conventionally and spelling is their weakest area, struggling writers improve their writing through writing workshop and struggling writers will significantly improve their writing through a one-semester course, but they will not reach grade level standards (192). This leads us to
understand that remediation and building strong writing skills must be an ongoing practice.

To replicate the program that Tomkins outlined would require a reworking of most curricula so that readings and writings were integrated and the students who were the instructional recipients of these assignments were considered in terms of their skills, backgrounds and developmental stages of writing. Teachers would need training and ongoing support to align their practices to include the explicit instruction needed for students to make improvements. It would also require a shift in belief, recognizing that low-achieving students can make progress.

Creating an Effective Writing Program

As an educator in a public school serving families from low-income households, the idea that my classroom can transform lives is a valuable thought that inspires, encourages and motivates me. In teaching other people’s children, we are given an enormous responsibility each day and we have the chance to create new futures, new citizens and affect the society in which we live. The ability to write well and inform people of your thinking is a powerful antidote to poverty, indifference and all the social problems that have existed and still exist today.

It is through writing that lives can be assessed and reimagined. In no other place but the writing classroom can students start with small steps and use them as building blocks to re-engage, rethink and reconnect to new educational opportunities in order to help prepare them for new choice about their futures. The keys to this engagement include quality assignments, explicit instruction, high expectations and professional development.
Designing Quality Assignments

Cheryl Glenn and Melissa A. Goldthwaite in, *The St. Martin's Guide to Teaching Writing* include a chapter titled, “Successful Writing Assignments.” They describe the ideal writing teacher, “The life of a writing teacher has often been described as a perpetual search for effective topics, writing prompts, and assignments: No matter how polished their courses seem, all good writing teachers remain on the lookout for more fruitful ways to help students develop their writing abilities” (89). Assignments that are high quality and provide rigor are often missing from writing classes that are remedial in nature but those assignments are the ones that will help students to become more effective in academic discourse. This type of discourse can seem overwhelming for students who struggle with the complexities of writing. Therefore, it becomes critical that “…our assignments provide them with a life jacket, a way of using their personal experience and ability to keep them afloat as they gain new information, knowledge and ability” (91).

The writing curriculum should follow a sequence where all the writing assignments are connected. The instruction can be based on various developmental areas including assignments that are based on narration, description, exposition and argumentation. These styles of writings need to be presented as means to develop writing abilities, not as isolated forms (Glenn and Goldthwaite 91). Instruction may focus on research, be based in literature, incorporate the use of technology or combine all of the above. However, all assignments must meet the criteria of being “good assignments.”
Good assignments need to have a purpose, must allow the students to use their experience as a starting place and ask students to write about concepts that are real to them rather than theoretical.

A good assignment, then, must be many things. Ideally, it should help students practice specific stylistic and organizational skills... A good assignment should furnish enough data (from format and page length to rhetorical method and topic limits) to give students an idea of where to start... A good assignment should encourage students to do their best writing and should give the teacher his or her best chance to help them do just that (Glenn and Goldthwaite 102).

To develop good assignments is at the heart of any writing program and it takes time, experience, a willingness to experiment (with the chance of success or failure), ongoing study of current research and best practices and the desire to see students engaged and enthusiastic about communicating their thoughts and ideas in writing. While these principles reflect what is needed in a college-level writing program, they also apply to middle and high school instruction. If students grow up experiencing quality writing assignments, not only will their thinking and skills develop, but also they will be able to express their ideas and present thoughtful work, which communicates the richness of their experience.

*Making Instruction Explicit*

Even if students are presented with writing tasks that incorporate all the best qualities of an assignment, they need explicit instruction as they encounter each assignment and they need to fully understand what it is that they are expected to do for this writing and why they are doing it. In any class, there will be students who will
require more explicit instructions than others and it will be the practice and expertise of the teacher to locate where help is needed. This is where the power and influence of writing begins to gain a new foothold in the educational lives of students. For some learners, their questions are never asked and, indeed, students may not know how to frame their concerns and it becomes the role of the educator to ferret them out through use of experience, intuition and assessment. Sometimes, it is as simple as having the student repeat what you asked them to do and to explain what they think that means. Of course this can be done in writing, offering another chance for students to access the power of writing as a learning tool.

This becomes on-going throughout the school year, teachers continually monitoring that their students understand what they are doing, why they are doing it and that they are able to start to independently make connections to their learnings. As educators, we have a group of students in front of us and it is our responsibility to move them forward, paying close attention to where their skills need to be strengthened and to encourage them to participate fully in their daily educational experiences. This is no easy task, but it begins with the intention of the teacher, each day, to hold that ideal as the goal of the class. Students need to understand that the work that is being created for them is important, serious and developed to offer them new ways to think about themselves and the world around them and that they will receive clear direct instruction to help them succeed in this endeavor.

Thus writing instruction can serve adolescents with a fresh experience of seeing writing as a way to learn. In order to learn, students must be able to write. Writing and learning share a symbiotic relationship and each supports the other, allowing the student
to express his or her understandings. It also is a way for students to react to the world around them to figure out the challenges presented in their lives and to find connection with others. By making instruction explicit, offering meaningful assignments that embed the skills needed to successfully complete them, making clear the purpose for what is being learned and giving support and encouragement, students can make progress in their writing as it continues to develop in organization, content and language sophistication.

*High Expectations*

To have students create effective writing that is academic in execution, we need to create a new framework for our classes. Students must see that there is a high level of expectation for their contributions. They must know the value of the work being assigned, the importance of each lesson and to be able to see how lessons are connected. Students must be able to understand how their work is going to be assessed and understand rubrics and/or other scoring guides. To create an environment where students are comfortable and willing to try new things, it is important that their efforts are respected. Shared mutual respect between all members of the learning community reinforces the idea of helping one another to experience more success.

The writing classroom should be a room filled with all types of reading texts and places where student work can be displayed. I often imagine the classroom to have the feel of a laboratory, a writing laboratory – a place where new discoveries are made and shared. It should contain adequate supplies of writing materials including thesauruses, dictionaries and other writing reference books. There should be available graphic organizers, double-entry journals, handouts containing dialogue tags, transitions and other useful reference materials to aid explicit instruction. It should also be equipped
with computers to take full advantage of students' interests in working with technology. It is here that they could experiment and learn about creating writing projects with sound and image, experiencing working collaboratively on digital projects using podcasts, wikis and more.

The classroom should also contain a library with a wide variety of books and genres that would reflect the interests of the students as well as appropriately leveled books to meet the different needs of the group. The expectations for the class need to come from the instructor. It is his or her role and his or her enthusiasm and high standards that will set the tone for the class. The educator will need to be aware of how students learn and understand composition theory and be able to put it into practice. The educator must be able to convey a work ethic and a sense of purpose each day and must also be able to respond to the particular needs of each student.

*Structuring the Writing Class*

As I first meet my students, I would have them complete a writing assignment I created that would allow me to have a baseline indicator of their writing abilities. I would explicitly explain what it is I am asking them to consider and what I am asking them to produce in the form of a text. I would model for them how I would gather information and ideas before I began my writing. It would be of great advantage for me to complete the assignment as well. This would be the perfect time to begin sharing the experience of writing in the classroom and to model the behaviors that will continue to build respect between all learners. There will be students who will have difficulty starting this process, some will think that it is not a good assignment and some may not want even to attempt to do any writing. This is where the art of teaching comes into play.
Sometimes to get writing from a student, it becomes necessary for you to give him or her something with which to start. In this case, perhaps a sentence that marks the beginning – the beginning of a piece of writing and the beginning of a new relationship, maybe one that will be unique to that student.

I would design my class around four themes – each theme building on the previous theme. In my school we use the text, *Prentice Hall Timeless Voices, Timeless Themes* and I would reference four of the major themes found in the text. I feel these themes are ones in which middle school or high school students can find text-to-self connections and would offer the foundation for writing assignments that have purpose, resonate with the students' lives and are connected in a way they would help develop students' skills.

Looking at one theme, "Meeting Challenges," I would choose the Langston Hughes short story, "Thank You, Ma'm" as a mentor text. The story has a compelling protagonist in Mrs. Luella Bates Washington Jones and the author's use of descriptive language, figurative language and reinforcement of the theme would have the possibility to engage the students in locating areas where they are "Meeting Challenges." It will be this story that will be used to assist the class in understanding character development, the structure of a short story, use of dialogue and we will refer to it throughout the marking period. This is a dynamic use of explicit instruction where, in fact, we invite the words of Langston Hughes to help us become better writers. I would also have students read and write a biography of Langston Hughes, read his poetry and extract personal meaning through a small reaction paper.
To reinforce the “Meeting Challenges” theme, I would also require students to read the novel *The Lilies of the Field* by William E. Barrett. The story of an African American man and his relationship with a group of German nuns would introduce them to a piece of quality literature with powerful themes of racism, individualism and persistence. It is only 128 pages long and this length would not be too intimidating for apprehensive readers. I would provide students with an anticipation guide before every reading to have them consider the ideas and events portrayed in the new section of the novel. This would give them the opportunity to build their confidence levels in expressing how they feel and give them many opportunities to support their thinking. I would introduce them to character traits and have them use semantic feature analysis as a way for them to record their findings about each character and instruct them how to use these devices to create and enhance future writings. Students would also complete double-entry journals in order to practice close reading and to make connections with the themes of the text. Meeting characters in the writings of Langston Hughes and considering strong themes in *The Lilies of the Field* would assist in helping students recognize and learn about the educational layering that will inform their future writings by providing them with access to materials and ideas to write about.

To facilitate the idea and experience that our classroom is place to exchange ideas through writings, I would require that students maintain a writing journal where they would reflect on questions or ideas discovered in class or at home. This would be an important way to integrate writing in students’ lives outside the classroom. As our school district debates allowing students to maintain and contribute to blogs, this would be an
ideal way for students to share ideas and writing, bringing the writing community from class to an online format.

With students learning and exploring characters and real people meeting challenges, I would also have students pay more attention to the news of the day. Students would be required to use newspaper accounts, magazine articles or news from credible Internet sources to acknowledge what is happening in the world and to think critically about the factors that constitute news reporting. This would also enlarge the theme of “Meeting Challenges” by presenting opportunities to examine real-life accounts.

I would incorporate lessons each day to provide direct whole class instruction. These lessons would be about one-half hour in length and would provide instruction on grammar, vocabulary and composition strategies. The development of vocabulary would be strengthened through choosing words to enrich writing. These words would aid in description, transition and context. Again, how to incorporate these words into powerful writing will be modeled for students with the expressed expectation that students begin to integrate these new words in their writings.

As students are adding content to the theme of “Meeting Challenges,” they are also generating ideas about their own lives. The opportunity to create authentic writing assignments that will allow students to tap into their personal lives is a vivid, engaging way to use writing and to make connections to others. It is important to showcase student work and students would be asked to write short stories geared toward students in lower grades and to visit those classrooms and read their stories to the students. The experience of presenting a published piece of writing and the effect it has on an appreciative audience can bolster the confidence of even the most timid writer.
My planned instruction would be circular in scope with all messages and stories coming back to the main theme. The students will begin to understand the different obstacles people in the world have to overcome and see ways to create new futures. A culminating project would be a research paper on “People Who Have Changed the World” (Appendix A). Students would be given a list of people who are known to have changed the world through meeting challenges and overcoming them and they would complete a research paper using MLA format, research skills and correct writing conventions. Since this would be the first research assignment of the year, students would be given directions to structure the paper and points to respond to in order to elicit information. The points listed are presented for the students to use as scaffolding for the level of writing expected. Some students will need to follow the directions and points exactly, while others will use them as a guide, but designing the first research assignment in this way offers a point of entry for students of all abilities.

All of the writing in class will be completed using the writing process. As student writers, I would want them to begin working to utilize pre-writing strategies, creating multiple drafts, revising and editing and publication but this cannot be accomplished without the various stages of the writing process being modeled to show students the expectations and purposes of each one. With guided practice, students will gain more control over each and incorporate it as a valuable way of writing. One part of instruction that students will need is meaningful feedback from the teacher that is clear and concise, offering direction on what to revise and how to make improvements.

To show the full impact of writing, students will be given numerous writing assignments from expository writing, persuasive writing, explanatory writing, research
essays, short stories and news writing to gain an appreciation for the different forms of writing. I would also look for ways to celebrate student work, utilizing bulletin boards throughout the classroom and school. The development of a literary magazine and school newspaper would offer outlets for their expression. Schools also have music programs and other events where the school community comes together to watch and listen to student performances. It takes only a little imagination to see students reading their writings as part of these performances. Student writings could also be exhibited much like art installations and perhaps even illustrated using the coordination of the art teacher in the building. This is another way to develop a sense of community through the use of writing. It also makes students feel pride when they see their work being read and considered by others.

Professional Development

Another part of the writing instruction program would be sustained meaningful professional development. Educating students from low-income backgrounds requires teachers to receive professional development in how to continually supply explicit instruction. Just like students in the classroom look to teachers for guidance and explanation, so, too, do teachers look to administrators to supply guidance and explanation. Education is part science and part art and, as a profession, those who become educators must be challenged in their classroom practices. This means receiving strategies on how to deliver instruction more effectively and the opportunities to meet with other teachers to map out what works and what needs improvement in these practices. This would involve educators to be given the time and the training needed to really look more closely at the work of their students and to be fully engaged in the latest
best practices. It would also involve follow-up opportunities to reflect on, question and realign these practices.

One of the most important aspects of education is mentoring. Educators need to be mentored and to know that someone is interested in their work. We want to be offered new ways to teach and we long for our work to be recognized and valued. This requires the time and dedication in developing relationships. The role of mentor and mentee contains powerful dynamics. The idea that there is someone willing and interested in helping us to learn and be able to make new understandings is exactly what students need and desire and this is also true for teachers.

Conclusion

If middle and secondary students who are from low-income backgrounds are to be prepared to participate effectively in academic discourse through writing, they need to be exposed to writing instruction that takes into account their backgrounds, skill levels and social and emotional needs. Five factors have been identified that influence student writing "including degree of emphasis on teaching component skills in context and on the meaningful use of writing, degree of connection between writing and students’ backgrounds, degree of student interaction while writing, problem-solving processes involved in the writing task, and frequency of opportunities to write extended texts" (Ball 296).

Taking these factors into consideration, authentic writing assignments where the student understands their purpose help to develop student thinking as does the critical thinking needed in learning to present cohesive arguments. Direct instruction in writing helps build proficiency, as does the writing process when it is explicitly taught in steps.
Teacher questioning and feedback are among the most powerful ways to improve student writing but these are skills that must be developed. Teachers must be aware of their attitudes toward the students they teach, realizing that poor grammar, lack of spelling skills or use of Non-standard English do not mean that students are lacking intelligence or do not have valuable things to say. Writing instruction can lead to transformation in the way it is presented, in the way students receive it, in the growth of academic abilities of students, in the way teachers affect the lives of their students and in the way the professional lives of writing teachers continue to expand with the acquisition of new knowledge and practices to enrich their classes.
Works Cited


“People Who Changed the World”

Eighth Grade Research Project

Overview

We will be exploring the topic, “People Who Changed the World.” You will have the opportunity to read about people who changed society by their beliefs and actions and met and surmounted challenges in doing so. To further your understanding of the potential one person has to affect change, you will complete a research project.

- You will conduct research on a person of your choosing to find out about how he or she changed the world and what challenges were met. You will write a research essay on your findings.

This project is intended to provide you with experiences that will help you develop your research and writing skills as well as give you a mature perspective on the issues that have concerned people as they sought to change the world for the better.
“People Who Changed the World”

Eighth Grade Research Essay

The research essay will consist of four parts:

1. **Title Page** – The title page must contain the title of your paper, your subject's name, your name, date and homeroom.

2. **Essay** – The paper will be at least three pages in length and written in your own words. It must include complete sentences, correct grammar and correct spelling. Your paper must be typed using size twelve Times New Roman font, one-inch margins, double-spaced and indented paragraphs. You need to use the Eighth Grade Research Paper Outline when writing your paper.

   Absolutely, NO PLAGIARISM WILL BE TOLERATED.
   You will receive a zero for the research essay.

3. **Works Cited** – You must use a minimum of 3 sources to be cited correctly.

4. **Research Essay Outline with Notes** – You must have a completed research essay outline with notes. Do not copy full sentences from your sources. I should be able to see how you constructed your research essay by reading your notes.

The following websites will provide information on how to complete a successful research paper:

http://owl.english.purdue.edu/owl/search.php

http://owl.english.purdue.edu/owl/resource/747/01

You are strengthening your research skills with this essay. You must take this project seriously and you must be on task when using the computers for research.

When you have completed all work, staple all parts together in the following order:

1. Title page
2. Essay (final copy only)
3. Works Cited page
4. Research Essay Outline with notes.
“People Who Changed the World”

Suggested Subjects

1. Muhammad Ali
2. Susan B. Anthony
3. Aristotle
4. Jane Austen
5. James Baldwin
6. Rachel Carson
7. Coco Chanel
8. Cesar Chavez
9. Jesus Christ
10. Winston Churchill
11. Cleopatra
12. Marie Curie
13. Leonardo da Vinci
14. Frederick Douglass
15. W.E.B. Du Bois
16. Albert Einstein
17. Anne Frank
18. Dian Fossey
19. Mahatma Gandhi
20. Bill Gates
21. Jane Goodall
22. Siddhartha Guatama (Buddha)
23. Homer
24. Dolores Huerta
25. Zora Neale Hurston
26. Chief Joseph
27. Martin Luther King, Jr.
28. Dalai Lama
29. Abraham Lincoln
30. Malcolm X
31. Nelson Mandela
32. Thurgood Marshall
33. Mother Theresa
34. Mohammed (Muhammed)
35. Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart
36. Ralph Nader
37. Florence Nightingale
38. Rosa Parks
39. Louis Pasteur
40. Eva Peron
41. Plato
42. Paul Robeson
43. Eleanor Roosevelt
44. Dred Scott
45. Socrates
46. Harriet Beecher Stowe
47. Henry David Thoreau
48. Sojourner Truth
49. Harriet Tubman
50. Ida B. Wells

If you are interested in researching someone who is not on this list, you must get the approval of your teacher.
“People Who Changed the World”

Eighth Grade Research Essay Outline

Student's Name

My subject is

My thesis statement is

You should try to find as much of the information listed below as possible. Include any other information you think is interesting.

I. Introduction

☐ Introduce your subject through your thesis statement.
☐ Discuss why you chose him or her.
☐ Describe what your subject is famous for doing.
☐ Discuss the connection your subject has to the topic, “People Who Changed the World.”

Notes:

II. Early Life

☐ Tell when your subject was born.
☐ Tell where your subject was born.
☐ Give details about his or her family life.
☐ Discuss what was unique or interesting about his or her early years.
☐ Discuss when he or she first became interested in bringing about change.

Notes:
III. **Accomplishments**

- Write about when your subject first started to receive attention for his or her actions.
- Discuss what your subject is the most famous for accomplishing. *(Make sure to include dates.)*
- Discuss what conflicts or obstacles your subject faced.
- Tell about the people who influenced or helped your subject.
- Write about other accomplishments your subject had. *(This could include writing, starting an activist movement, being involved with other social or political issues, etc.)*

**Notes:**

IV. **Later Life**

- Give the year when your subject died (if relevant).
- Tell how and where your subject died (if relevant).
- Describe your subject’s career at the end of his or her life or tell what your subject is doing now (if relevant).

**Notes:**

V. **Historical Importance of Your Subject**

- Give some background information about the time and place in which your subject worked to make change happen.
- Discuss what caused your subject to take the actions he or she did.
- Discuss the historical importance of your subject’s accomplishments.
- Explain the effect your subject had on changing the world.

**Notes:**
VI. Your Reaction to the Work of Your Subject

☐ Tell what you think about your subject’s life.
☐ Give your opinion of the changes and actions associated with your subject.
☐ Tell whether you would support those changes or actions.
☐ Discuss if the changes your subject is associated with are still issues today.

Notes:

VII. Conclusion

☐ Discuss why your subject was famous.
☐ Summarize your subject’s accomplishments.
☐ Reflect on the importance of one of your subject’s accomplishments.
☐ Write a powerful concluding sentence about your subject.

Notes:
“People Who Changed the World” Websites

http://google.com
http://yahoo.com
http://ask.com
http://www.wc.pdx.edu
http://www.biographyonline.net/people/people-who-changed-world.html
http://www.biographyonline.net/people/women-who-changed-world.html
http://teacher.scholastic.com/activities/women/notable.htm
http://www.infoplease.com/biography/activists.html
http://www.americaslibrary.gov/cgi-bin/page.cgi/aa/activists
http://afroamhistory.about.com/od/socialreformers/Social_Reformers_Leaders.htm
http://www.betterworldheroes.com

You may not use Wikipedia as a source.
How to Create a Works Cited Page

**BOOK**

Author’s name (last, first, middle) ________________________________ (period).

Title (*italicized*) ________________________________ (period).

Place of publication ________________________________ (colon):

Publisher __________________________________________ (comma),

Year ________________________________ (period).


**REFERENCE: ENCYCLOPEDIA**

Author’s name, *if available* (last, first, middle) ________________________________ (period).

Article title (“quotation marks”) ________________________________ (period).

Title of encyclopedia (*italicized*) ________________________________ (period).

Year ________________________________ followed by edition (abbreviated, ed.) ________________________________ (period).


**INTERNET WEBSITE**

Title of article (“quotation marks”) ________________________________ (period).

Title of web site (*italicized*) ________________________________ (period).

Date of access: Day Month (abbreviated – period.) Year ________________________________ (no period)

URL (<Website address in angle brackets>) ________________________________ (period).

This Works Cited page follows the MLA format. MLA (Modern Language Association) style is most commonly used to write papers and cite sources within the liberal arts and humanities.

- The format should be double-spaced and if there are additional lines after the first one, those lines should be indented.
- Works Cited is not italicized nor are quotation marks used.

For a complete resource on a MLA Works Cited page, refer to the following web site:

http://owl.english.purdue.edu/owl/resource/747/05/
## RUBRIC FOR "PEOPLE WHO CHANGED THE WORLD" RESEARCH ESSAY

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Student's Name:</th>
<th>4</th>
<th>3</th>
<th>2</th>
<th>1</th>
<th>SCORE</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Organization</strong></td>
<td>Information is very organized with well-constructed paragraphs.</td>
<td>Information is organized with well-constructed paragraphs.</td>
<td>Information is organized, but paragraphs are not well constructed.</td>
<td>The information appears to be disorganized.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Quality of Information</strong></td>
<td>Information clearly relates to the topic. It includes supporting details and examples.</td>
<td>Information clearly relates to the topic. It includes some supporting details and examples.</td>
<td>Information clearly relates to the topic. Few details and examples are given.</td>
<td>Little Information is given relating to the topic.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Sources</strong></td>
<td>All sources are accurately documented in the proper format.</td>
<td>All sources are accurately documented, but some are not in the proper format.</td>
<td>All sources are accurately documented, but many are not in the proper format.</td>
<td>Some sources are not accurately documented.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Notes</strong></td>
<td>Notes are recorded and organized in an extremely neat and orderly fashion.</td>
<td>Notes are recorded legibly and are somewhat organized.</td>
<td>Notes are recorded.</td>
<td>Few notes are recorded.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Internet Use</strong></td>
<td>Successfully uses suggested Internet links to find information and navigates within these sites easily without assistance.</td>
<td>Usually able to use suggested Internet links to find information and navigates within these sites easily without assistance.</td>
<td>Occasionally able to use suggested Internet links to find information and navigates within these sites easily without assistance.</td>
<td>Needs assistance or supervision to use suggested Internet links and/or to navigate within these sites.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Paragraph Construction</strong></td>
<td>All paragraphs include introductory sentence, explanations or details, and concluding sentence.</td>
<td>Most paragraphs include introductory sentence, explanations or details, and concluding sentence.</td>
<td>Paragraphs include related information but are typically not constructed well.</td>
<td>Paragraph structure is not clear and sentences are not typically related within the paragraphs.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Mechanics</strong></td>
<td>No grammatical, spelling or punctuation errors.</td>
<td>Almost no grammatical, spelling or punctuation errors.</td>
<td>A few grammatical, spelling or punctuation errors.</td>
<td>Many grammatical, spelling or punctuation errors.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Format</strong></td>
<td>Presentation is extremely neat. Title page is correctly formatted. Paper is assembled in correct order. All parts of the paper are included.</td>
<td>Presentation is neat. Title page is correctly formatted. Paper is assembled in correct order. All parts of the paper are included.</td>
<td>Presentation is poor. Title page may not be correctly formatted. Paper is assembled in correct order. All parts of the paper are included.</td>
<td>Presentation is poor. Title page may not be correctly formatted. Paper is not assembled in correct order. Some parts of the paper are not included.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**TOTAL SCORE:**

**GRADE:**

**COMMENTS**

Adapted from Division of Staff Development, Best Practices and Innovative Programs workshop on Research Papers