

## Reading, Writing, and Thinking: High School/College Connections

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Nearly 20 years ago, Francis Christensen observed, “we do not really teach our captive charges to write better—we merely *expect* them to” (3). Since then, college writing programs have made considerable gains in teaching writing. High school English teachers, however, have been less able to channel their expectations about students’ writing into effective pedagogies. A restricted range of reading materials, limited opportunities for writing, and highly traditional teaching practices keep many high school students from understanding and practicing the multiple roles and functions of discourse.

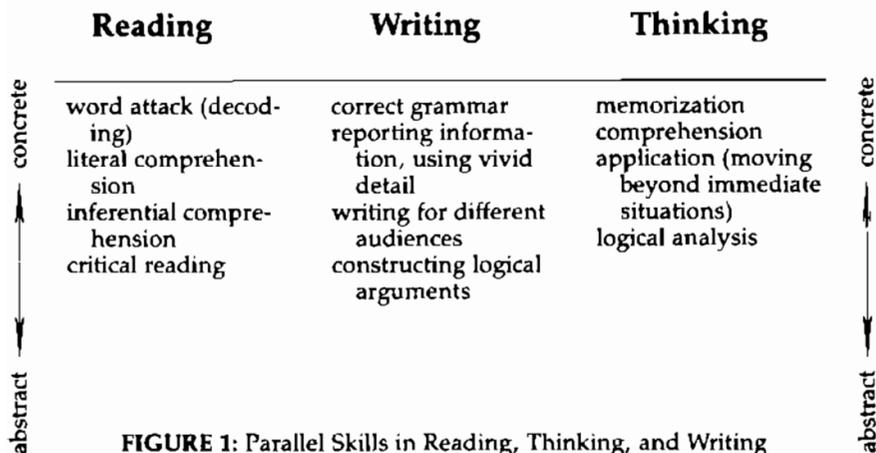
This is a study of high school English.<sup>1</sup> But its more important implications are for college writing programs. The study not only sheds some light on why entering college students have some of the problems they do with writing, it also suggests parallels between the shortcomings of high school writing instruction and those of college programs. Unless writing program administrators have a detailed understanding of high school preparation, they risk creating freshman writing curricula based largely on guesswork about what students must have done, on hazy recollections about what, as freshmen, writing program administrators may themselves have done, or on a stiffnecked insistence on what freshmen ought to have done. By better understanding the nature of reading, writing, and thinking in the secondary English curriculum, writing program administrators are more likely to avoid repeating a critical flaw in secondary language instruction: the unquestioned expectation that students should already be able to read, write, and think at relatively high levels of abstraction.

### Reading, Writing, and Thinking in Secondary English

In the fall of 1983, 144 high school English teachers in the Salt Lake metropolitan area responded to an extensive questionnaire asking them to describe their teaching practices and expectations about their students’ abilities in reading, writing, and thinking. The study represents teachers from 17 high schools in six school districts, yielding a healthy response rate of 90%. The purpose of the study was to find out whether secondary English instruction in these critical language areas was con-

sistent with teachers' perceptions of their students' needs and abilities and with current thinking about effective language instruction. We were less interested in the validity of teachers' beliefs about their work than in the beliefs themselves, since these beliefs largely determine what and how any teacher teaches. We were especially curious to discover what kinds of consistency these teachers were able to achieve within the three language areas of their curriculum: whether, for example, the reading program complemented the writing program, whether the writing program was consistent with teachers' cognitive goals, and so forth. While the study is not a definitive analysis of secondary English teaching, the data achieve enough internal consistency and statistical reliability to warrant some tentative observations.

The questionnaire contained parallel sets of questions on students' reading, writing, and thinking abilities, and on teaching practices in these areas. Figure 1 represents the parallelism we established among these abilities. Using a Likert scale of 1-7, teachers uniformly rated students highest in the most concrete of these abilities—literal comprehension in reading, reporting of information in grammatically correct written form, and memorization—and lowest in the abilities requiring more abstract, independent thought. Overall, however, they considered students' abilities in all three areas average or below.



These perceptions of students' reading, writing, and thinking abilities are significant in view of the contrasts with reported teaching practices. In English classes, high school students primarily read fiction and poetry. Yet despite their dissatisfaction with students' reading, teachers seldom use even the most basic techniques for reading instruction such as identifying new vocabulary or previewing a text, and they almost never individualize reading assignments or allow students to choose their own material.

Writing, as Applebee and others have also shown, is primarily in the form of short answer and paragraph-length responses, and it is used essentially to validate reading comprehension. Teachers in our study reported that students write, on average, once a week, a figure that is somewhat misleading because it includes short answer assignments. Thus, Applebee's conclusion seems equally appropriate here: "One of the major problems with an overemphasis on mechanical writing tasks is that the students may never learn to use such resources as their own, relying instead upon the structure or scaffold that the teacher has provided" (101). Moreover, although teachers seem to expect critical/analytic writing to derive from students' reading, they do not recognize the highly specialized and abstract nature of the discourse they are really looking for: literary criticism. The infrequency of extended writing assignments, those in which writers might go beyond reporting what they read, combined with the absence of audiences other than the teacher, provide powerful reinforcement for the low levels of thinking, reading, and writing the teachers complain about. Although the overwhelming majority of high school teachers report that logical organization and thorough development of ideas are for them the most important qualities of good writing, their assignments and teaching practices offer almost no opportunity for students to learn these skills. Teachers apparently expect students to write analytically and read critically, but little in their daily practice is devoted to teaching either one.

Conversely, non-literary reading materials (such as correspondence, reportage, or actual trade materials) and concrete writing assignments (such as the preparation of letters, advertisements, booklets, or newsletters) are almost non-existent. Yet, unlike literary readings, these reading materials often have definite audiences and specific purposes, as do writing assignments that might be tied to them. These more concrete assignments for reading and writing could introduce secondary students to fundamental concepts about selection of material, the problems of presenting it to one audience rather than another, the differences between data and opinions, thesis and support—in short, all the rhetorical and conceptual problems that are obscured in esoteric writing assignments about symbolism in *Heart of Darkness*. (Table 1 summarizes the means for teachers' reports on teaching practices and student abilities in reading, writing, and thinking.)

**TABLE 1. High and Low Means for Teachers' Reports on Reading, Writing, and Thinking**  
 (Scale: 1-7)

	High	Low	
Reading	Ability	Strongest in literal comprehension (4.5)	Weakest in critical reading (3.6)
	Assignments	Most frequent in fiction/poetry (5.6)	Least often newspapers, magazines, and other non-fiction primary sources (2.9)
	Teaching Practices	Most often assess reading by asking students to demonstrate comprehension in writing (5.7)	Least often: vary reading assignments for weak or strong readers (3.5)
Writing	Ability	Strongest in reporting information (4.6)	Weakest in writing for varied audiences (3.6) and developing a logical argument (3.8)
	Assignments	Most often write short answers (5.2), paragraphs (5.1), and personal experience essays (4.4)	Least often write advertisements (1.9), letters (2.8), news articles, (2.6), or pamphlets (1.7)
	Teaching Practices	Most often assign essay tests (5.3) and writing based on reading assignments (5.6)	Least often assign writing for varied audiences (3.8); provide opportunities for peer feedback and revision (3.8)
Thinking	Ability	Most able to perform tasks involving memorization (4.6)	Least able to perform tasks involving analysis (3.8)

Secondary English teachers seem to be good diagnosticians of their students' strengths and weaknesses with language. What they seem less able to perceive are the causal relationships between their own teaching practices and the limitations they find in their students. In her conclu-

sions about secondary teaching from studying twelfth graders' composing processes, Janet Emig concluded that "much of the teaching of composition in American high schools is probably too abstract for the average and below average students" (99). The present study helps to confirm that claim and extends Emig's conclusion. It's not just the restricted mode of writing so pervasive in secondary school and the ways teachers talk about writing that perplex high school students. The contradictory messages conveyed by so many "report-what-you-know" assignments coupled with the indigestibility of the regular diet of reading and writing also seem to play a major role. The de facto definition of writing as reportage probably promotes the conviction, staunchly held by college freshmen, that writing is a matter of asserting "the facts"—whether these facts are baldly literal statements from reading or, ironically, the equally unchallengeable truths of personal belief and opinion.

The most troublesome aspect of our study is our nagging suspicion that the teachers' reports are somewhat inflated—that the picture of the high school English curriculum that emerged is probably rosier than high school classrooms really are. Informal followup interviews with several participants lead us to conclude that many teachers, despite our admonitions not to, felt the need to report more on what they believe they should do than on what they actually do. Thus, the actual frequency of good teaching practices (assigning writing longer than a paragraph, varying reading assignments for individual students, designing writing assignments for a particular audience or purpose, or making writing available for peer feedback) is very likely less than what is reported here.

To gain some inferential support for this observation, we used a relatively new statistical technique called a multiple regression path analysis. This technique allowed us to locate clusters of teachers according to demographic similarities and to identify significant relationships among specific teaching practices, assignments in reading and writing, and beliefs about students' language skills. By allowing us to look beyond the rough indication of trends provided by the means, this analysis lets us see how teaching practices and assignments are related. All the observations that follow are at a confidence level of .05 or better.

On the positive side, those few teachers who use peer feedback to provide an audience and purpose for a piece of writing and who provide opportunities for revision tend to make more innovative and varied reading and writing assignments. Teachers with more advanced students (usually those teachers with advanced preparation and more years of experience) devise the most varied and innovative assignments in reading and writing. They also think about problems of audience in their

writing assignments, and they most regularly ask students to share their work for the purposes of revision. On the other hand, by far the greater proportion of teachers, though who work mainly with average or below-average students, are also those who are most dependent on rigid reading lists and formulaic, teacher-centered writing. Unfortunately, these students probably need the most concreteness and variation in their work, even though they receive the least. Finally, the cluster of teachers who show more variety and innovation also tend to be most critical of their students' reading and writing abilities, while the bulk of teachers, who rely on formulaic writing assignments, restricted reading lists, and other traditional practices, rate their students' reading and writing abilities somewhat higher. While this finding might be taken to justify the continued onslaught of back-to-basics, it seems more likely that most teachers are simply complacent about their students' performance, failing to challenge their students or be challenged by them.

By examining writing in the context of thinking and reading skills, we were interested in looking at the role of writing not in relation to the content of the curriculum, but in relation to the basic learning processes of reading and thinking about that reading. In all three areas—reading, writing and thinking—teachers expect students to operate at higher levels than they do, yet they fail to teach the preliminary or supporting skills that would let them realize their expectations. They expect students to read critically, but rate them highest in literal comprehension; they expect students to think analytically but rate them highest in memorization; they expect students to write logically about worthwhile topics but rate them highest in being able to report information.

In the broadest sense, what is lacking is the implementation of teaching practices that present all these skills as interrelated processes. The product approach, "I assign it, you do it," continues to dominate. Within this approach, however, are more subtle but equally self-defeating practices. Although virtually all writing is based on reading (which is almost exclusively literary writing), reading and writing are not introduced as processes or ways of knowing. The absence of prereading activities such as asking students to predict what a text will be about, or discussing the relationship of a new text to previous subject matter keeps secondary students from understanding how reading, thinking about reading, and writing about reading are intimately linked within the individual. Further, the almost total absence from the secondary curriculum of any self-selected reading fails to teach students that one might conceivably read to find out something of interest or importance, or write about that reading to explore it further or to express what has been discovered. In short, students fail to understand their own role in making meaning, assuming instead that meaning is something Out There that gets imprinted on them like a tattoo.

The purposelessness of their reading is echoed in the purposelessness of their writing: our study, like others on secondary writing, showed an almost total absence of writing for any audience other than the teacher, and for any purpose other than to fulfill an assignment and demonstrate mastery of course content. If students read, write, and think at the literal level as their teachers complain, they seem to be called upon to do little else. In fact, they seem never to learn how to do the very things their teachers expect them to do, so their low-level performance in each of the three areas simply reinforces their performance in the others.

### Implications for College Writing Programs

The most important implication of this study for writing program administrators is this: many of our most central ideas about writing are alien, if not antagonistic to the view of writing that students acquired in secondary school. State colleges and universities with open admissions policies are likely to have the highest numbers of students who, considered average in high school, were exposed to the most limited of teaching practices. Although students have learned the basic vocabulary of writing—audience, revision, thesis, drafting, and the like—they have not had opportunities to apply these concepts to their own writing in sustained or varied ways. Their experiences with writing have simply not been such that they have learned to meet their teachers' foremost expectations for logically organized, intellectually worthwhile writing. What seems more prevalent in their experience is formulaic writing where purpose and audience are obscured by requirements that specify the length, shape, or type of the final product. Students have not had regular opportunities to do writing that is sustained enough to encourage the disciplined, independent thinking that enables a person to wrap his or her mind around a concept and turn it into a controlling idea—at least one that has the subtlety and complexity we normally want to see in college writing. If, for secondary students, writing derives from reading, which is primarily literature read at the level of literal comprehension, then writing is little more than reporting literary events to a teacher, based on only a superficial understanding of plot and character. Expecting flexibility and breadth from students whose writing experience has been this constricted is a little like expecting an assembly line worker to transform herself into a robotics engineer merely by changing her title.

To help students reshape their understanding of writing as they enter college, they need to practice it and understand it in as wide a context as possible. To borrow James Moffett's terminology, they need to record, report, generalize, and theorize for a range of audiences from

the self to the distant other. Like the secondary teachers we surveyed, college writing teachers cannot take for granted their students' abilities to think, read, or write at the higher reaches of the cognitive scale. Instead, we need to recognize their strong tendency to view writing simply as reportage and thus develop our own courses in ways that build upward from this base, helping students along the way to recognize how analyzing, interpreting, or evaluating ideas presupposes but also differs from written recitation.

Further, we need to take into consideration the limitations of students' reading experiences and emphasize the interdependence of reading and writing, especially using texts in a variety of areas besides the literary. Given their limited reading experience, we probably need to be especially careful not to fall into the same trap that ensnares secondary teachers—the assumption that entirely on their own, students can read a text critically and insightfully. Anthologies that barrage students with an array of discourse forms on a broad range of interesting but unrelated subject areas (sometimes held together only by a loose abstraction like "The Individual and Society" or "Technology") may be as impenetrable in their own way as the highly specialized demands of literary criticism that bewildered students in high school. There now seems to be no question that reading comprehension is essentially contextual.<sup>2</sup> We understand a particular text largely on the basis of what we already know about the subject generally. Otherwise, to draw on a dietary metaphor, ingesting a smorgasbord of reading delights without adequate preparation of the system leads to rather dyspeptic writing.

Therefore, college programs, like high school programs, need to integrate writing and reading instruction in ways that move students beyond memorizing and reporting information. To do so, writing curricula probably should be more tightly organized than they often are around specific bodies of information, with assignments governed by specific cognitive or rhetorical tasks. In essence, until high school English teaching undergoes radical reform, college writing programs need to incorporate much of what is prescribed here for high school writing programs. Far from turning college writing instruction into high school remediation, this study suggests that the diversity and concreteness of reading, writing, and cognitive tasks that undergird higher order skills could vastly strengthen programs at both levels.<sup>3</sup>

More research needs to be done to explore pressing questions about the intellectual readiness of secondary students to engage in the formal reasoning processes necessary for mature writing. Although writing development may be closely bound up with issues of emotional or chronological maturity, our study suggests that entering students' lack of rhetorical and conceptual skill derives in large measure from their

restrictive experiences with language and ideas in secondary school. Whether a writing program at any level is conceived as a service course to the writing of other disciplines or is more broadly epistemological in its focus, writing courses themselves need to achieve close and meaningful ties among reading, writing, and thinking activities so students obtain a clear sense of how they are manipulating words and ideas to make meaning. Without a curriculum that accounts for the need to *develop* mature discourse, a need that goes largely unrecognized in high school, we need to ask ourselves whether college writing instruction is repeating the shortcomings of secondary writing instruction, where so much occurs by accident, so little by design.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup>We wish to thank the Department of Educational Studies at the University of Utah for funding this research.

<sup>2</sup>For some useful material on reading as a contextual activity, see the following: Kenneth Goodman, "Reading: A Psycholinguistic Guessing Game," *Journal of the Reading Specialist* 6 (1967); Kenneth Goodman, "Psycholinguistic Universals in the Reading Process," in Frank Smith (ed.), *Psycholinguistics and Reading*, (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1973); and Frank Smith, *Essays into Literacy*, (London: Heineman Educational Books, 1983).

<sup>3</sup>For applications of reading theory to college writing instruction, see Marilyn Sternglass, "Integrating Instruction in Reading, Writing, Reasoning" in Janice Hays, et. al. (eds.), *The Writer's Mind: Writing as a Mode of Thinking*, (Urbana, NCTE, 1983).

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