The College Board

REPORT OF

The National Commission on Writing

IN AMERICA'S SCHOOLS AND COLLEGES

The Neglected "R"

THE NEED FOR A WRITING REVOLUTION

APRIL 2003

The National Commission on Writing
IN AMERICA'S SCHOOLS AND COLLEGES

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Writing today is not a frill for the few, but an essential skill for the many.

The National Commission on Writing in America©Schools and Colleges

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

American education will never realize its potential as an engine of opportunity and economic growth until a writing revolution puts language and communication in their proper place in the classroom. Writing is how students connect the dots in their knowledge. Although many models of effective ways to teach writing exist, both the teaching and practice of writing are increasingly shortchanged throughout the school and college years. Writing, always time-consuming for student and teacher, is today hard-pressed in the American classroom. Of the three "Rs," writing is clearly the most neglected.

The nation's leaders must place writing squarely in the center of the school agenda, and policymakers at the state and local levels must provide the resources required to improve writing. Here are the Commission's recommendations about what will be required to create a writing revolution and some suggestions about how to launch it:

A Writing Agenda for the Nation

- Every state should revisit its education standards to make sure they include a comprehensive writing policy.
- That policy should aim to double the amount of time most students spend writing, require a writing plan in every school district, insist that writing be taught in all subjects and at all grade levels, and require successful completion of a course in writing theory and practice as a condition of teacher licensing.
- National political leadership should put the power of the bully pulpit to work through a National Conference on Writing.
- Higher education should address the special roles it has to play in improving writing. All prospective teachers, no matter their discipline, should be provided with courses in how to teach writing. Meanwhile, writing instruction in colleges and universities should be improved for all students.
- States and the federal government should provide the financial resources necessary for the additional time and personnel required to make writing a centerpiece in the curriculum.

Time

- The amount of time students spend writing (and the scale of financial resources devoted to writing) should be at least doubled.
- Writing should be assigned across the curriculum.
- More out-of-school time should also be used to encourage writing, and parents should review students' writing with them.

Measuring Results

- Public and private leaders and assessment experts must ensure that assessment of writing competence is fair and authentic.
- Standards, curriculum, and assessment must be aligned, in writing and elsewhere in the curriculum, in reality as well as in rhetoric.
- Assessments of student writing must go beyond multiple-choice, machine-scorable items. Assessment should provide students with adequate time to write and should require students to actually create a piece of prose.
- Best practice in assessment should be more widely replicated.

Technology

- Government should extend the underlying premise of recent federal telecommunications policy by recognizing that the national technological infrastructure for education is as critical to the United States in the twenty-first century as highways were in the twentieth. They can do so by creating a National Educational Technology Trust to finance hardware, software, and training for every student and teacher in the nation.

- Private and public leaders should work with educators to apply new technologies to the teaching, development, grading, and assessment of writing.
- The nation should invest in research that explores the potential of new and emerging technologies to identify mistakes in grammar, encourage students to share their work, help assess writing samples, and incorporate software into measuring student writing competence.

Teachers and Professional Development

- Writing is everybody's business, and state and local curriculum guidelines should require writing in every curriculum area and at all grade levels.
- Writing opportunities that are developmentally appropriate should be provided to every student, from the earliest years through secondary school and into college.
- Common expectations about writing should be developed across disciplines through in-service workshops designed to help teachers understand good writing and develop as writers themselves.
- Universities should advance common expectations by requiring all prospective teachers to take courses in how to teach writing. Teachers need to understand writing as a complex (and enjoyable) form of learning and discovery, both for themselves and for their students. Faculty in all disciplines should have access to professional development opportunities to help them improve student writing.
- University–school partnerships should encourage greater experimentation and the development of new model programs to improve teaching and learning for English-language learners.

An Action Agenda

- To move this national writing agenda forward, the Commission proposes a five-year Writing Challenge for the nation and seeks the support of leaders from education, government, business, and the philanthropic world for this Challenge. The Challenge should issue progress reports, map the terrain ahead, and provide assistance to educators on the many details that remain to be ironed out on topics such as writing assessment and the use of technology.

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PREFACE

In an effort to focus national attention on the teaching and learning of writing, in September 2002, the College Board—a nonprofit membership organization composed of more than 4,300 schools and colleges—established the National Commission on Writing in America's Schools and Colleges. The decision to create the Commission was animated in part by the Board's plans to offer a writing assessment in 2005 as part of the new SAT®, but the larger motivation lay in the growing concern within the education, business, and policy-making communities that the level of writing in the United States is not what it should be. Although there is much good work taking place in our classrooms, the quality of writing must be improved if students are to succeed in college and in life. The addition of a writing component to the SAT and the establishment of a writing commission respond directly to that concern. We hope that the work of this commission and the agenda it lays out will help create a writing revolution in the United States.

The Commission, aided by an advisory panel of academic experts on writing, was made up principally of teachers, superintendents, and college and university presidents and chancellors. It was asked to define and reaffirm the central role of writing in education and to make recommendations about how students, their families, schools, colleges, and universities could improve writing quality in the United States.

During the course of its work, the Commission met to offer guidance to its staff and consultants on the major issues that should govern writing policy in the United States. It also reviewed research and policy proposals provided by the advisory panel. Commission members also agreed on the broad dimensions of what this report should say, and they provided detailed guidance about the report's main themes and recommendations.

As we went about our work, we were impressed with the energy and talent of the writing community. A lot of excellent work is under way to improve writing, at both the school and college levels. This document incorporates several examples of these efforts. We were equally impressed with how much remains to be accomplished. Of necessity, much of our discussion focuses on this unfinished work.

This Commission has no authority to impose change. Our only lever is the power of persuasion. Our role is to express the need for a cultural transformation that will improve writing in the United States. Our intention is to press for such a transformation. We intend to expand our membership into a new Writing Challenge. This new effort will be designed to support the writing community in creating a writing agenda for the nation, an agenda that provides for a comprehensive writing policy, doubles time and resources for writing, supports teachers' professional development, draws on the promise of technology, and encourages fair and authentic assessment.

We want to thank our colleagues on the Commission for their commitment to this effort and for the many thoughtful ways in which they shaped this document. Although each member would undoubtedly write a slightly different report, all of us support the broad directions outlined here. We also thank the members of the advisory panel for their hard work. We listened intently to their advice and tried to do justice to what they had to say, even if we did not always follow their suggestions to the letter.

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CHAPTER 1

The Neglected "R"

Writing, education's second "R," has become the neglected element of American school reform. The school improvement journey that began 20 years ago with the publication of *A Nation at Risk* is well begun, but it is only partly finished. In the minds of policymakers, learning improvement focuses largely on facts, discrete areas of curriculum, and educational institutions. In this Commission's view, the concept of educational reform must be expanded to include ideas; the ability of students to think, reason, and communicate; and broad community and societal support for the goals of learning. What is required is not another educational fad forced upon overworked teachers, professors, and administrators, but a fundamental reformulation of what this society means by learning and how it encourages young people to develop their full potential.

The nation's education challenge is to take a promising reform idea organized around important common expectations and the measurement of results and infuse it with energy so that schools are interesting, learning is powerful, and students become confident self-starters. A commitment to writing, not simply among educators but also among policymakers and the general public, is one of the underdeveloped ingredients. If students are to make knowledge their own, 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 short, if students are to learn, they must write.

The Power of Writing

When education was a private good, available to only a small elite in the United States, grammar, rhetoric, and logic were considered to be the foundation on which real learning and self-knowledge were built. That is to say, policy and pedagogy united around the proposition that how to say things correctly, how to say them well, and how to make sure that what one said made sense were important educational values. To reap the full benefits of the great democratization of learning in the United States, these three elements should still be pillars of learning.

At its best, writing has helped transform the world. Revolutions have been started by it. Oppression has been toppled by it. And it has enlightened the human condition. American life has been richer because people like Rachel Carson, César Chavez, Thomas Jefferson, and Martin Luther King, Jr., have given voice to the aspirations of the nation and its people. And it has become fuller because writers like James Baldwin, William Faulkner, Toni Morrison, and Edith Wharton have explored the range of human misery and joy. When pressed, many of us, young and old alike, still turn to pen and ink in the effort to make sense of our grief, pleasure, rage, or happiness (see "Letters at Ground Zero," below, for examples of how powerfully children can express their emotions).

Writing enriches the nation's political life as well. Few national leaders have matched the power and persuasiveness of Abraham Lincoln or Franklin D. Roosevelt as they called out to the better angels of the American nature. All of these leaders and others have used the power of words, language, and writing to remind Americans of what high standards they have set for themselves — and what these ideals mean to the rest of the world.

At a deeply practical level, writing sustains American life and popular culture in many ways that are clear and in some that are rarely noticed. Most people understand that somebody has to write a book or a short story. But there is not a movie, advertising jingle, magazine, political campaign, newspaper, theatrical production, hit record, comic book, or instructional manual that does not begin with writers and rest on writing. Popular culture and the economies of the Western world depend on writing today in ways hard to imagine even a few generations ago. Although only a few hundred thousand adults earn their living as full-time writers, many working Americans would not be able to hold their positions if they were not excellent writers. And the number of full-time writers is expected to grow faster than employment generally for the next decade.[1]

Even people who do not think of themselves as writers understand the importance of writing to their careers. More than 90 percent of midcareer professionals recently cited the "need to write effectively" as a skill "of great importance" in their day-to-day work.[2] The world in general, and advanced societies in particular, now demonstrates a nearly voracious appetite for highly educated people. To respond to it, fully three-quarters of American high school graduates enroll in an institution of higher education immediately after graduation from high school,[3] probably because they understand that college-level skills are the key to employment security in a fast-changing world. This new environment places a greater premium on the ability of the average American to communicate clearly than it ever has before. Fields like engineering emphasize the written materials, such as proposals and interim and final reports, that are essential by-products of technical work. The reward of disciplined writing is the most valuable job attribute of all: a mind equipped to think. Writing today is not a frill for the few, but an essential skill for the many.

LETTERS AT GROUND ZERO

Queridos Bomberos, Gracias a todos los bomberos por salvar a la gente.
Yo soy Amy
(Dear Firemen, Thanks to all the firemen for saving people. I am Amy)

Dear Fireman,
My name is Cadence. I'm missing an uncle. Please find him. His name is Gonja. His family misses him. We'll keep praying for him. If he's alive and you find him tell him "Cadence and his family miss him." He was the Best uncle in the world. I feel like crying.
Love, Cadence — Grade 4

I feel sad because one of my dads best friends named Eric died.
He worked in the first twin tower.
Charlotte — Grade 2

My hero,
My pillow before a fall,
My life preserver in deep water,
My medicine during a cold,
My fuel during a race,
My jacket in cold weather,
My solution to a problem,
My help in time of need,
My family,
My very own firefighter—My Uncle Phil
Gregory — Grade 5

I've learned — that your life can be changed in a matter of minutes,
by people who don't even know you.
John — Grade 8

Look at the terrorists, they don't care
The terrorists might be here today
We must destroy them, they must pay
They have hurt us in more than one way.
Leovina — Grade 5

The time has come to fight back and we are. By supporting our leaders and each other, we are stronger than ever. We will never forget those who died, nor will we forgive those who took them from us.
Michael — High School

I've learned — that the people you care about most in life are taken from you too soon.
Shelina — Grade 8

Selections from: Shelley Harwayne, ed., *Messages to Ground Zero: Children Respond to September 11, 2001.* Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann, 2002.

The Educational Value of Writing

Developing fluency in writing has always been a fundamental aim of education, even if the promise has never been fully realized. In today's complex, high-technology world, the importance of writing as a fundamental organizing objective of education is no less valid or practical. Writing, properly understood, is thought on paper. Increasingly, in the information age, it is also thought on screen, a richly elaborated, logically connected amalgam of ideas, words, themes, images, and multimedia designs. Whether on paper or on screen, writing is an overlooked key to transforming learning in the United States.

Michelangelo, a sculptor and artist, understood a writer's challenge clearly. This genius thought of his art as little more than the task of releasing the figure that was already there from the block of marble in which it had always been embedded. Expert writers, like skilled sculptors, cooperate with the material at hand. In a sense they participate with it, so that anything that might get in the way of appreciating what they are trying to get across is carved away to permit the central ideas to emerge. Working with the same material, unskilled writers misread the seams, in the process wrecking the marble and confusing the central point.

Writing extends far beyond mastering grammar and punctuation. The ability to diagram a sentence does not make a good writer. There are many students capable of identifying every part of speech who are barely able to produce a piece of prose.[4] While exercises in descriptive, creative, and narrative writing help develop students' skills, writing is best understood as a complex intellectual activity that requires students to stretch their minds, sharpen their analytical capabilities, and make valid and accurate distinctions.

Above all, as students and young adults begin a lifetime of learning, they will find that writing is liberating, satisfying, even joyful. Writing is not simply a way for students to demonstrate what they know. It is a way to help them understand what they know. At its best, writing is learning. Writing competence builds confidence, which readily turns into creativity and fun, precisely what is most frequently absent from the policy

discussions about today's schools. As a nation, we can barely begin to imagine how powerful K–16 education might be if writing were put in its proper focus. Facility with writing opens students up to the pleasure of exercising their minds in ways that drilling on facts, details, and information never will. More than a way of knowing, writing is an act of discovery.

Commitment to Writing

American education will never realize its potential as an engine of opportunity and economic growth until a writing revolution puts the power of language and communication in their proper place in the classroom. Yet, although many models of effective writing instruction exist (see "First-Grade Cross-Generational Writing," opposite), both the teaching and practice of writing are increasingly shortchanged throughout the school and college years.[5] Disciplines such as mathematics, history, science, and foreign language properly deserve the attention they receive. This Commission holds no brief for the idea that writing can be improved while substance is ignored. Still, writing is how students connect the dots in their knowledge. And writing, always time-consuming for student and teacher, is today hard-pressed in the American classroom.

Despite its importance to learning, formal attention to writing leaves a lot to be desired, in both school and college. At the high school level, for example, although enrollment in challenging high school mathematics and science courses has climbed in the last decade, participation in courses like English composition has dropped.[6]

The commitment to writing on college and university campuses can also be called into question. Recent analyses indicate that more than 50 percent of first-year college students are unable to produce papers relatively free of language errors.[7] Analyzing arguments and synthesizing information are also beyond the scope of most first-year students, according to these accounts. Yet, complaints about the inadequacy of undergraduate writing programs and problems associated with leaving the teaching of writing to inexperienced graduate students have gathered dust on shelves for decades.[8]

FIRST-GRADE CROSS-GENERATIONAL WRITING

The first-grade teaching team at Goodman Elementary School in Chandler, Arizona, desperately wanted to get computers into its classrooms. The school, meanwhile, was looking to improve its relationship with the many retirees who make up our community and who continually oppose school bond issues.

This is where the Cross-Generational Writing Project began. The project envisioned regular e-mail correspondence between Goodman's first-graders and the senior retirees in Sun Lakes. The specific curricular objective was to promote, refine, and improve written language skills by exchanging stories, tales, and life experiences. Those skills extended to mastery of correct letter form, complete sentences, spelling and punctuation, and creative writing. The students would be able to use their senior partners as writing models. Our proposal also encouraged lifelong learning for the senior citizens.

Six seniors agreed to work with us. Most had never used computers, not to speak of going online, getting e-mail, and sending messages in return. Once they began corresponding, they could also call me for telephone support if they got stuck. The Sun Lakes seniors were also intimidated over what they were going to say to little kids—until they went through a first run, when they realized, "This is a piece of cake. These are just 6-year-old children." Questions such as "How are you?" "What color eyes do you have?" and "Do you have a dog?" began to flow.

Meanwhile, the project was building in a level of self-esteem and motivation for students by letting them bond with their senior counterparts via computer education, written language instruction, and a rewarding friendship. The participants, old and young alike, also developed a cross-generational understanding and appreciation of various cultures and heritages. The seniors regularly shared stories about their family members, what they did themselves as youngsters, and letting the present youngsters know "what the world was like back then."

We ended our year with a party in the school library. We invited our e-mail buddies to come and visit us. We presented them with flowers, awards, and lots of first-grade cheer. We also shared the substantial portfolio of student and senior writing examples that had grown over the past months. Creative writing had become a paramount activity to the students instead of drudgery, and they were writing very detailed, complete paragraphs.

The seniors, meanwhile, couldn't wait to meet the kids: they were thrilled, they said, to be involved with children's learning and were impressed with how much these children had learned and grown in their writing. This was a wonderful way to end the year.

We have over 30 Sun Lakes Buddies writing to us now. The retirees are also seeking more activities they could be doing on the Web and are e-mailing us with interesting sites they have found. To accommodate this surge in participation we had to train some parents in e-mailing and let them help us get our 75 first-graders e-mailing at least twice a month.

We have also established ongoing exchanges with retired educators in California and other retirees across the country. And recently when one member of the first-grade teaching team visited Japan, she corresponded via e-mail with her students. So, if you think first-graders and e-mailing won't work, think again! These children are making lifetime friendships with the computer, the e-mailing process, and of course, the writing process.

Source: Rikki L. Hayes, First-grade teacher at the Goodman Elementary School, Chandler, Arizona. Available at the National School Network: http://nsn.bbn.com/community/call_stories/stories_intro.shtml.

What the Assessments Tell Us

Despite the neglect of writing instruction, it would be false to claim that most students cannot write. What most students cannot do is write well. At least, they cannot write well enough to meet the demands they face in higher education and the emerging work environment. Basic writing itself is not the issue; the problem is that most students cannot write with the skill expected of them today.

The latest findings from the National Assessment of Educational Progress ("the nation's report card") support those conclusions.[9] These findings indicate that most students have mastered writing basics, but few are able to create precise, engaging, coherent prose. These 1998 findings (see Figure 1) indicate that about four out of five students in grades 4, 8, and 12 are at or above the "basic" level of writing. However, only about one-quarter at each grade level are at or above the "proficient" level. Even more telling, only one in one hundred is thought to be "advanced."

Figure 1

National Writing Achievement by Grade Level, 1998

GRADE	Below Basic	At or Above Basic	At or Above Proficient	Advanced
Four	16%	84%	23%	1%
Eight	16%	84%	27%	1%
Twelve	22%	78%	22%	1%

Source: U.S. Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics, *The NAEP 1998 Writing Report Card for the Nation and the States.* Available at: nces.ed.gov/nationsreportcard.

The NAEP standards establish a very high threshold. Students can "write." They "know" language, in some sense. The difficulty is that they cannot systematically produce writing at the high levels of skill, maturity, and sophistication required in a complex, modern economy. The Commission referred above to the inability of almost all students to create prose that is precise, engaging, and coherent. That is a sort of shorthand for the "proficient" standards set by NAEP at grade 12 (see "High School Student Writing," below). These are standards that encourage first-rate organization,

convincing and elaborated responses to the tasks assigned, and the use of rich, evocative and compelling language. Those standards set a very high bar. Only about one-quarter (22 percent) of all high school seniors are able to meet it.

The NAEP data indicate that when asked to think on paper, most students produce rudimentary and fairly run-of-the-mill prose. Writing at the basic level demonstrates only a limited grasp of the importance of extended or complex thought. The responses are acceptable in the fundamentals of form, content, and language. These students are able to organize their thoughts and provide some supporting details, while their grammar, spelling, and punctuation are not an utter disaster. On the whole, readers are able to understand what these students are trying to say.

However, about three-quarters of students at all grade levels are unable to go very much beyond that. By grade 12, most students are producing relatively immature and unsophisticated writing. Indeed, more than one in five continues to produce prose with a substantial number of errors in grammar, spelling, and punctuation.[10] We must do better.

The Need for a Cultural Sea Change

What the Commission proposes in the pages that follow is a revolution of sorts, a cultural sea change that would provide writing with sufficient time and resources in the classroom. If this revolution succeeds, it can produce a society in which:

- All school and college graduates will find themselves equipped to meet the writing demands of the workplace.
- All students will be better equipped to tackle demanding advanced courses requiring fluent command of language — not only those in literature, history, sociology, and political science, but also courses in mathematics, science, and technology.
- All students will be better prepared to take advantage of the many opportunities for postsecondary education in the United States.

- Above all, armed with new strengths in analysis and logic, Americans will be better equipped to observe, think, and make judgments about the many complex and demanding issues that come before the citizenry in a democracy.

All of those desirable goals are within our reach — if this generation can be true to the best American instincts and traditions. Our generation has somehow convinced itself that the wealthiest nation in the history of the world is destitute and unable to finance pressing public needs. Yet, no matter how distressed the economy was in the past, when pressed about critical public needs, Americans always responded. Today's most pressing domestic challenge is that of improving public schools. In dealing with this challenge, one of the greatest potential rewards lies in better writing — and improved thinking.

HIGH SCHOOL STUDENT WRITING

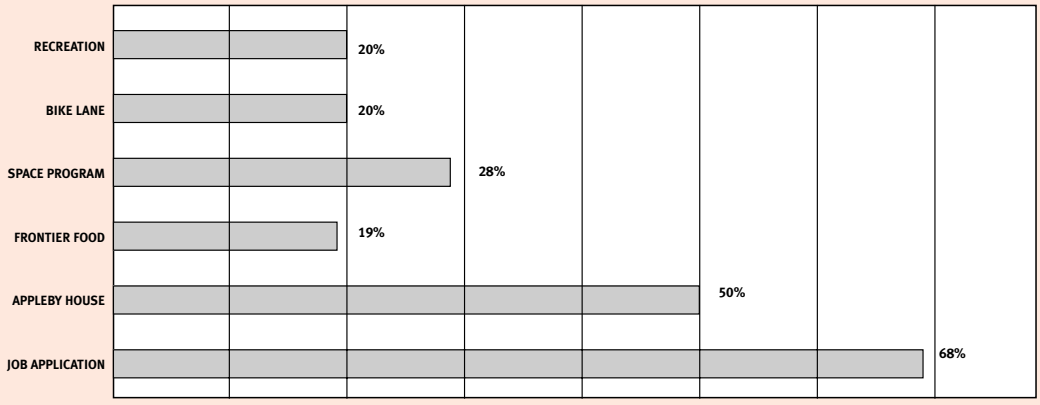
The following NAEP writing samples may be considered typical of current writing by high school students. Students were given six assignments: two pieces of informative writing (1) to justify their qualifications for a summer job and (2) to explain "Appleby," a local haunted house; one piece of analytic writing about frontier diets; and three pieces of persuasive writing taking a position on (1) bike lanes in their neighborhood, (2) the space program, and (3) the need for more recreational facilities.

Below are three representative pieces submitted about the Appleby House. Each is a complete, unedited response to the exercise. The Appleby exercise provided students with basic information about the house and asked them to write an explanatory newspaper article about it.

Rating	Representative Text
Unsatisfactory 48% of respondents	The house with no windows. This is a house with dead-end hallways, 36 rooms and stairs leading to the cieling [sic]. Doorways go nowhere and all this to confuse ghosts.
Adequate 50% of respondents	Man builds strange house to scare ghosts. He says that he did it to confuse the ghosts. But why may we ask would he want to spend 10 years building a house. For instance there are stairs that go nowhere and hallways that go nowhere. This house has 36 rooms. If you ask me I think it is kind of strange.
Elaborated 2% of respondents	Years of rumors and unsubstantiated reports have created, in a quiet urban neighborhood, a house of horrors. The dwelling is one Appleby House, a modest dwelling of 36 rooms built over an 8 year period. On interviewing neighbors, who dubbed the owner "strange," one finds that 10 carpenters have been employed to build such oddities as stairways to ceilings, windows on blank walls, and doorways going nowhere. According to reports, these bizarre customizings are intended to confuse ghosts. Maybe the owner will report one day that he has caught one in a dead end hallway! Until then, however, the mystery of the building of Appleby House remains just that—a mystery.

The figure below displays the proportion of students rated adequate in all six areas.

Proportion of Eleventh-Grade Students Rated "Adequate" or Better by Writing Task



Source: OERI, 1993.

CHAPTER 2

Challenges Ahead

Substantively, four challenges require particular attention: time for writing, assessment or measuring results, integrating technology into the teaching and learning of writing, and support for teaching and other classroom issues.

A Prisoner of Time

In today's schools, writing is a prisoner of time. Learning how to present one's thoughts on paper requires time. The sheer scope of the skills required for effective writing is daunting. The mechanics of grammar and punctuation, usage, developing a "voice" and a feel for the audience, mastering the distinctions between expository, narrative, and persuasive writing (and the types of evidence required to make each convincing) — the list is lengthy. These skills cannot be picked up from a few minutes here, and a few minutes there, all stolen from more "important" subjects.

Yet at the elementary school level, according to data from NAEP, practically all students (97 percent) report spending three hours a week or less on writing assignments, which amounts to about 15 percent of the time they spend watching television. The situation is only marginally better in high school. About half of twelfth-graders (49 percent) report that they are assigned a paper of three or more pages perhaps once or twice a month in English class. Nearly four in 10 (39 percent) reported such assignments "never" or "hardly ever."[11] And the extended research paper, once a rite of passage in the senior year, is rarely required any more because teachers do not have time to deal with it.[12]

Teachers no less than students are trapped in the time dilemma. Elementary school teachers typically face a single class of 25 to 35 students. While the task of teaching writing has to be shoehorned into the time available during the day, the sheer number of students facing the elementary teacher is not an insuperable obstacle to teaching writing. Many upper-level teachers, on the other hand, face between 120 to 200 students, weekly if not daily. Teachers of English (or history or biology) who ask simply for a weekly one-page paper are immediately overwhelmed with the challenge of reading, responding to, and evaluating what their request produces.

More attention must be paid to writing. More time must be found for it. And teachers must be provided with the time and resources required if they are to perform their work professionally.

Measuring Results

Assessment is one of the major pillars of the standards-based reform movement that has swept across American education in the last two decades. Without accurate measurement of what students have learned, neither school nor academic officials — nor parents and students — will know where they stand. But as everyone understands, student performance and growth in writing are difficult to measure, for many reasons. Standards vary from place to place and state to state. Unless they have been carefully trained, individual evaluators may hold different expectations for student performance. Since single assessments are unlikely to be able to show the range of a student's abilities — and cannot conceivably measure growth — a writing assessment, ideally, should rest on several pieces of writing, written for different audiences and on different occasions. Writing assessment is a genuine challenge.

Despite these difficulties, assessment systems have an important role to play in the improvement of the teaching and learning of writing. While individual students need to know their strengths and weaknesses, their teachers also need to understand when students are writing effectively and when they are experiencing difficulty. With new rubrics and other evaluation guides for teachers, considerable progress has been made in recent years toward improving the writing evaluation in the classroom. Outside the classroom, many others concerned with education — including policymakers, parents, researchers, admissions officials, and members of the general public — expect to have some sense of both individual and collective student success in writing.

If assessment systems are to help improve writing, several challenges must be overcome. Three are of particular concern to the writing community. The first is that no single piece of writing, even generated under ideal conditions, can serve as an

adequate indicator of overall proficiency.[13] The second is that students need enough time to plan, produce, revise, and edit a single piece of written work under test conditions. While the amount of time required may vary depending on the assessment itself, without adequate time, students cannot provide an accurate picture of their abilities. The third is a sense of concern about the appropriate uses of different types of assessment. Confusion about policy goals frequently confounds measurement purposes and instruments. It is unlikely that the same assessment instrument can be used for program evaluation, institutional accountability, and enhanced student learning.

In combination, these considerations of purpose, opportunity, and time complicate the measurement agenda and establish a demanding assessment standard.

Technology and the Teaching of Writing

Meanwhile, just as they have transformed schools, offices, and homes, computers have introduced entirely new ways of generating, organizing, and editing text. Computers help shorten the work of composing and revising. The tedious task of retyping entire pages simply to move a sentence is a thing of the past. Technology also opens new opportunities for helping children learn the rudiments of grammar and composition, while encouraging them to share their work with one another. Although the norms and forms of electronic communication are hardly rigorous, it is apparent that many of today's young people, raised at keyboards and eager to exchange messages with their friends, are comfortable with these new technologies and eager to use them.

It is equally clear that schools face challenges when they take advantage of these new possibilities. Teachers have to reconsider their inherent attitudes about the value of writing grounded in new technologies. Far from undermining libraries, the Web puts the world at students' fingertips. Letters and notes are still appropriate in many circumstances, but e-mail, instant messaging, and electronic conferencing provide writers with an immediate and much larger audience. Educators need to tap into students' inherent interest in these methods of creating and sharing writing.

Beyond that, there is no doubt that the resources for technology available to schools and colleges — including hardware, software, and teacher development — are often inadequate and frequently unequal. Although important efforts have been made by state and national leaders, in partnership with the private sector, a lot remains to be done in this area. Policymakers need to make sure that students and faculty members in every school and college have access both to current technologies and the training needed to take advantage of them.

The Teaching Dilemma

The teaching of writing presents its own challenges of policy and pedagogy. It will not be reasonable to ask more from classroom instructors unless they are also provided with more assistance. Yet teachers typically receive little instruction in how to teach writing. Only a handful of states require courses in writing for certification, even for elementary school teachers. And very few high school instructors in disciplines such as history, science, or mathematics are exposed to courses in how to teach writing. No matter how hard they work, these instructors, lacking any real understanding of what good writing is or looks like, are often ill equipped to teach it.

Part of the difficulty is that pre- and in-service teacher professional development rarely offers teachers an opportunity to see themselves as writers — to experience the power and satisfaction of writing as a means of learning and self-expression. Most teachers also do not enjoy access to the latest, high-quality training opportunities (see "Redesigning Professional Development," below). Writing is a prisoner of time in the preparation and continuing professional development of teachers, as well.

Second-language learners: All of these classroom issues resonate with a special force when English-language learners and immigrant children enter the classroom. Teachers confront growing linguistic diversity; English-language learners are one of the fastest growing student populations in the United States. Too frequently, teachers are forced to confront these new challenges without the support and training

required to respond to the special needs of these students.[14] Outside the regular classroom, poorly designed English as a Second Language programs can oversimplify communication in English and provide little interaction between English-language learners and other students.

Immigrant Americans have always articulated the problems and promise of the United States powerfully. No matter their native language, they have often expressed the experience and condition of people in this country most deeply. The role of our nation, and its schools, should continue to be what it has been at its best: helping non-native speakers give eloquent voice to their experiences and aspirations. These students should be considered not a burden to be borne and "fixed," but a resource to be developed and valued.

A Field of Vision

Those four issues — time, measurement, technology, and teaching — frame the field of vision the Commission brings to the challenge of improving writing. That vision involves a national writing agenda and a national writing challenge.

REDESIGNING PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT

Old workshop delivery models for teachers are giving way to vibrant ongoing professional learning communities where teachers generate, as well as gain, knowledge. The National Writing Project, arguably the most successful teacher network in the United States, offers a model of how to foster learning communities of teachers. Begun in 1974, the project has spawned 165 regional learning communities — school–university partnerships that help teachers improve how they teach writing and foster student learning.

Based on a two-year study of two sites, we conclude the project's successful approach lies in a distinctive set of social practices that motivate teachers, make learning accessible, and build an ongoing professional community. The social practices include:

Treat every colleague as a potentially valuable contributor. The project builds its agenda around the contributions of every participant. What each teacher thinks, wonders, reads, learns, and questions becomes the content for professional development.

Teach other teachers. The project encourages a dual commitment from teachers: to share what they know and to learn from what colleagues know.

Share, discuss, and critique in public forums. Key to breaking through teacher isolation and silence are the public forums that the project creates for teachers to share their work and then critique and discuss it.

Turn ownership of learning over to the learners. The project insists on professional development built around the problems and concerns that teachers raise. Such a practice turns the current notion of teacher accountability on its head because teachers become responsible for assessing classroom practices.

Situate learning in practice and relationships. This kind of learning requires a community that encourages and supports those who take risks, that tolerates mistakes and learns from them, and that values constructive critique.

Provide multiple entry points into learning communities. Inexperienced teachers want to learn basic strategies; those with some experience may be in search of new strategies; veteran teachers find that they learn a great deal by sharing what they have honed from years of practice.

Reflect on teaching by reflecting on learning. Teachers who reflect on their own learning can apply these insights to their teaching.

Share leadership. From the beginning, teachers lead discussions, give teaching demonstrations, and prepare for taking their best work public.

Adopt a stance of inquiry. Inquiry and research are fundamental to good teaching. Together, teachers can find better ways to answer the learning needs of students.

Rethink professional identity and link it to the professional community. Quality teaching is not just an individual but a group responsibility.

Adapted from: Ann Lieberman and Diane R. Wood, "Redesigning Professional Development," *Educational Leadership*, March 2002. Complete text available at: http://www.ascd.org/author/el/2002/03march/lieberman.html.

CHAPTER 3

Recommendations

To help schools create skillful, self-confident writers, the Commission advances five major recommendations. They involve (1) a national writing agenda; (2) time; (3) the measurement of results; (4) technology; and (5) professional development.

I. A Writing Agenda for the Nation

WE RECOMMEND *that the nation's leaders place writing squarely in the center of the school agenda and that policymakers at the state and local levels provide the resources required to improve writing.*

Reading, 'riting, and 'rithmetic have always been the keystones of educational policy. Yet writing is truly the neglected "R" in the school reform movement.

- **Comprehensive Writing Policy:** Governors, legislators, local school boards, and parent groups should underscore the importance of writing by developing clear, unambiguous, and comprehensive policies that aim to double the amount of time students spend writing; ensure that every school district has a writing plan; insist that writing be taught at all grade levels and in all subjects; and provide for teacher professional development.
- **Federal Leadership:** We ask legislators and policymakers to work together to establish a National Conference on Writing (involving federal, state, and local leaders, educators, parents, and writing experts) to speak with a clear voice on the importance of writing in American schools. Nothing can alert the general public to the significance of this issue more quickly and powerfully than what President Theodore Roosevelt once called the "bully pulpit."
- **State and Local Leadership:** We ask governors, state legislators, mayors, county executives, state and local boards of education, college and university presidents and faculty members, and school superintendents, principals, and teachers to make the case that effective writing is essential, not merely to the nation's economic well-being but to its future as a vibrant, informed, and humane democratic society.

Part of that leadership responsibility lies in persuading the general public that schools cannot be improved without resources and that writing, in particular, requires substantially more support if student achievement is to improve.

- **State Standards:** Forty-nine states now have some statement about uniform standards and expectations for student performance by level of schooling. The writing policy contemplated by the Commission should explicitly incorporate writing into these standards and the assessment systems aligned with them.
- **Teacher Education:** Statewide policy and standards should require that teacher preparation programs provide all prospective teachers with exposure to writing theory and practice. State and local educational leaders should also provide support for multiple workshops and other opportunities that encourage teachers already in the classroom to upgrade their writing skills and competence as writing teachers.
- **Higher Education's Role:** Colleges and universities have an obligation to improve teacher preparation (discussed under Recommendation 5) and make writing more central to their own programs of study. The teaching of writing at the college level should be infused across the curriculum. Formal courses in the teaching of writing (including English Composition) should be the responsibility of well-trained, qualified professional staff.
- **Resources:** Writing is essential. Society cannot continue to impose unfunded mandates on schools and colleges in the form of new demands without also providing additional resources to help educators respond. "Excellence costs," as the National Commission on Excellence in Education reported 20 years ago, "but in the long run, mediocrity costs far more."

2. Time

WE RECOMMEND *that state and local education agencies work with writing specialists to develop strategies for increasing the amount of time students spend writing.*

Because writing requires time, the Commission is troubled by findings that most students spend little time writing. It is small wonder that students do not write well. Most do not have sufficient time to practice the art.

- **Time:** The Commission believes that the amount of time most students spend writing should be at least doubled. This time can be found through assignments at home and by encouraging more writing during the school day in curriculum areas not traditionally associated with it. This change alone will do more to improve student performance than anything else states or local school leaders can do.
- **Writing Across the Curriculum:** We strongly endorse writing across the curriculum. The concept of doubling writing time is feasible because of the near-total neglect of writing outside English departments. In history, foreign languages, mathematics, home economics, science, physical education, art, and social science, all students can be encouraged to write more — and to write more effectively.
- **Assignments:** We suggest more use of out-of-school time for writing. From elementary school on, students should be expected to produce written work as part of their normal homework assignments. Just 15 minutes of writing four nights a week would add 33 percent to the amount of time the average elementary student spends writing. Parents should be writing partners with their children, sharing their own writing with them and reviewing written work as their children complete it. Research is crystal clear: Schools that do well insist that their students write every day and that teachers provide regular and timely feedback with the support of parents.

Time is writing's great ally. Policymakers must help schools find the time students (and teachers) require if writing is to be effectively taught and developed.

3. Measuring Results

WE RECOMMEND *that governors, legislators, local school boards, and companies specializing in testing ensure that the assessment of writing is fair and authentic.*

Because machine-readable, multiple-choice tests produce quantifiable results and are relatively easy to administer and score, there is a great temptation to treat these results as unusually accurate. The tyranny of the written word is a small burden compared to the despotism of tables offering the comfort of precision. This is true no matter how frequently testing companies caution the unsophisticated about the interpretation of results.

Writing is one area where using multiple-choice questions as the sole assessment technique compromises the very talent the assessment sets out to gauge.

Machine-scorable questions in writing are appropriate in certain situations — to see, for example, if a student can identify parts of speech, correct grammatical errors, or sort out meaning. But an authentic assessment of writing depends on requiring students to create prose that carefully trained people read and evaluate in a fair and consistent fashion.

- **Alignment:** Policymakers must ensure that assessments across the board are aligned with the standards and curriculum. This is particularly critical in writing, which is likely to be more difficult to assess accurately than many other areas of the curriculum. Although virtually every state commits itself to alignment between standards and assessments, recent rigorous reviews of state standards and assessment efforts indicate that only 9 or 10 states have well-aligned systems, while many of the remainder have quite a bit of work to do.[15] To maintain faith with the public that has committed itself to high expectations, standards and assessments must be aligned, in writing and elsewhere, in reality as well as in rhetoric.

- **Nature of Assessment:** As noted above, students should be required to produce a piece of writing as part of the assessment process. Multiple-choice, machine-scorable questions and answers will not be sufficient here. The Commission believes that assessment programs must provide adequate time for students to plan, write, and edit a piece of prose. In this regard, the Writing Challenge described below should devote considerable attention to what an effective national assessment of writing competence should look like.
- **Best Practice in Assessment:** Effective writing assessments do exist and associations of state and local education leaders should encourage their widespread replication. In assessing writing, there should be no need to reinvent the wheel.

Substantial progress has been made in training readers to evaluate student writing samples consistently and fairly. It is, therefore, possible to assess writing, but nobody should underestimate the difficulty.

4. Technology

WE RECOMMEND *that the private sector work with curriculum specialists, assessment experts, and state and local educational agencies to apply emerging technologies to the teaching, development, grading, and assessment of writing.*

As noted earlier, modern telecommunications and technologies have transformed the American home and workplace. These emerging technologies can be applied in the classroom with similar powerful effects.

- **Technology and Writing Policy:** Recent federal telecommunications policy has recognized that the national technological infrastructure for education is as critical to the United States in the twenty-first century as highways were in the twentieth. This recognition should be extended to financing the hardware and software required in schools and colleges (and training for faculty and teachers). A National Educational Technology Trust should be explored, perhaps financed through federal–state–private partnerships, to pay for up to

90 percent of the costs associated with providing hardware, software, and training for every student and teacher in the nation.

- **Teaching and Learning:** We believe new technologies can advance both the teaching and learning of writing. Fairly simple programs already exist to improve language and writing basics. These programs can assist both teachers and students. Although no one should expect software to develop advanced writing skills, the Commission believes that programs can be developed to help all students develop at least modest competence as writers. The development and classroom application of these programs should be encouraged.
- **Time:** The Commission believes that technology holds out great promise as a means of expanding time for writing, for both students and teachers. For students, it is clear that computers, search engines, workstations, and printers open up new timesaving possibilities as they research and write their papers. Developing software programs also make it possible for technologically based corrections and commentary on students' papers, providing teachers the opportunity to assign writing that they cannot now find the time to correct.
- **Research on Technology:** Our society must invest in research on how new and emerging technologies can help improve writing. Areas of exploration should include:
    - the use of software to identify mistakes in grammar and spelling;
    - the value of programs that permit students to share and edit their work with each other;
    - the use of emerging programs to enhance the ability of students and teachers to assess writing samples; and
    - the development of software to measure student writing competence in formal, standardized assessments.

As in other areas of our national life, technology and software cannot be expected to substitute for human judgment, but they can undoubtedly become invaluable allies in the quest to improve writing instruction, learning, and assessment.

5. Teachers and Professional Development

WE RECOMMEND *that state and local educational agencies provide comprehensive professional development for all teachers to help improve classroom practice.*

Teachers deserve support as they develop students' writing. Nowhere is this more important than in isolated rural communities and the nation's major cities. School graduates from these areas commonly report they were poorly prepared for the expectation of "academic literacy" on campus and on the job — a set of skills grounded in the ability to read, write, speak, and think critically.

- **Writing Is Every Teacher's Responsibility:** Developing writers is everybody's business. It is not a simple and easy task, or something that will be finished and out of the way by the end of next week, or even the end of next year. Developing critical thinkers and writers should be understood as one of the central works of education. State and local curriculum guidelines should require writing in every curriculum area and at all grade levels (see "High School Biology and Writing," opposite). Writing should be considered every teacher's responsibility.
- **Teacher Education:** Expectations for good writing should be universal among all teachers. Universities can help advance common expectations by requiring courses in teaching writing for all prospective teachers. States can reinforce this requirement by insisting on successful completion of a course in writing theory and practice as a condition of teacher licensing. Universities should also offer teachers opportunities to learn writing theory and develop their own writing skills. They should provide pre-and in-service opportunities so that teachers themselves can write and enjoy the opportunity to respond to examples of student and peer writing. These efforts can help teachers experience writing both as a way of demonstrating knowledge and as a complex form of learning and discovery.

HIGH SCHOOL BIOLOGY AND WRITING

Robert Tierney, a biology teacher at Irvington High School in Fremont, California, believed that writing could be a powerful learning tool for his students. But for many of his colleagues, time spent writing was time lost for learning science.

But Tierney believed there was also a place for what he terms "expressive writing": "Few biology teachers are themselves writers. Yet modern biology instructions require a hands-on, inquiry, think-through-the-problem approach. Expressive writing is a means of thinking through a problem," he said.

With a colleague, Tierney divided the 136 sophomore, junior, and senior biology students at Irvington into an experimental group and a comparison group. Both would cover the same topics at the same time, do the labs, and have homework assignments corrected with a stress upon usage and spelling. The experimental group was asked to keep reading logs and "neuron notes" or learning logs. It was also asked to complete practice essays, develop writing directed at specific audiences other than the teacher, make end-of-class summaries, participate in group writing, and take essay tests. The comparison group kept no reading logs or neuron notes. It was not asked to provide a practice essay, write to any audience other than the teacher, or provide end-of-class summaries. The comparison group provided some limited group writing, but in place of essay tests, it completed multiple-choice tests.

Two tests, one on genetics after the first semester, and the second on seed plants following the second semester, were used to assess the results. For each, a pretest and a posttest were developed, using the same multiple-choice questions. In addition, a longer-term "recall" test was administered to test students' recall of genetics (after 16 weeks) and seed plants (after three weeks).

The results speak for themselves. Both the experimental and comparison group performed at about the same level on the multiple-choice tests. But, after 16 weeks, the experimental group scored 11 percent higher than the comparison group on genetics recall. After three weeks, the experimental group outperformed the comparison group by 5 percent on seed-comparison recall.

Tierney and his colleague, Harry Stookey, concluded that students with the opportunity to write had retained more of what they had learned. Further, they concluded that writing had helped these students "learn the subject matter more thoroughly, and their papers, reflecting what the student actually understands, are interesting to read."

Source: The National Writing Project, and Carl Nagin, *Because Writing Matters: Improving Student Writing in Our Schools.* San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2003.

- **Professional Development:** Common expectations about good writing must be developed across the disciplines. Teachers and school administrators can build common performance expectations by convening regular workshops on what constitutes good writing, particularly at the middle and high school levels where each student has several teachers. These workshops and professional development opportunities should be provided to every instructor. Teachers should be reminded that good writing extends beyond language formalities and grammar to incorporate content, substance, and meaning. Finally, these workshops should introduce teachers to the use of technology in improving writing, while asking teachers to consider how writing changes as it moves online.
- **Classroom Practice:** We ask that writing be considered a priority at all levels of schooling. As school leaders develop these new policies, they should incorporate writing opportunities for every student from the earliest years of school through secondary school. The barriers between the categories below are elastic and porous, but classroom practice and curricula should be developmental so that they move from:
    - children's literacy development in the early years involving drawing, talking, word play, spelling, pictures, and writing stories, through
    - middle school programs that encourage observational, descriptive, and analytical writing, to
    - high school programs involving complex summaries, lab reports, book reviews, and reflective and persuasive essays of different lengths and levels of difficulty. This work should demand analysis, synthesis, and research from every student, in a variety of literary and nonliterary genres.
- **English-Language Learners:** We point to the special needs of English-language learners. The Commission believes there is an urgent need for school–university partnerships to serve these students and build on their strengths. Multiple-language learning is a remarkably sophisticated activity, a multiplicative process that, at its best, encourages dual languages to interact with each other in powerful ways. When that dynamic develops, in both language and writing, the learning that takes place is much more than the

sum of the languages' parts. This is an area that promises rich dividends from greater experimentation, and from more fieldwork and model programs developed and analyzed in partnerships between school officials and academic researchers.

Professional development demands the best efforts of the entire education community. Neither universities nor schools can ignore their obligations to improve the teaching of writing. It should also be understood that writing will not be improved on the cheap or by hectoring teachers. At all levels, writers face problems, and teachers are needed to support their growth. Policymakers and opinion shapers need to consider these challenges sympathetically, not dismiss or deride them.

An Action Agenda

This report cannot implement itself. Sustained follow-through is needed, or else these recommendations, like so many others, will gather dust on library shelves. The Commission proposes the creation of a new group charged with implementing a Writing Challenge to the Nation, an action agenda for making sure the recommendations in this document are put in place.

In our view, the Challenge should be an in-depth, five-year, blue-ribbon effort to guide policymakers and practitioners in the difficult work ahead, issue progress reports, and provide assistance to state and local educators. At the policy level, the Challenge should provide detailed guidance on the best ways to develop writing, employ technologies, expand writing time, and advance measurement. For state and local educators, the challenge should provide guidance on best practice in assessment and the measurement of results.

Above all, the Challenge should keep its eye relentlessly on implementation. It can help governors and legislators make writing a priority. It can insist that resources should be adequate to support the effort. It can campaign so that colleges and universities require courses in the teaching of writing of all prospective teachers. It can encourage the private sector to work with curriculum experts to improve the application of technology to the teaching of writing. And, it can serve as the bridge between writing theory and writing practice.

The Commission asks foundations to join with nonprofit groups to finance the Challenge.

A Working Program for Creating a Nation of Writers

What the Commission has outlined above amounts to a working program to encourage a cultural change around writing in the United States, in both schools and colleges and in the larger society. It calls for leadership, resources, and a new emphasis on a comprehensive writing policy. It asks for the time writing deserves in the curriculum. It devotes a lot of attention to the heart of the matter — teaching and classroom needs. It explores how technology can be used to advance writing and examines the dimensions of a responsible and effective assessment system. Finally, it lays out an action agenda, a Writing Challenge to the Nation, to address the many details that remain to be ironed out.

Our final comment is more in the nature of a plea to the writing community than a recommendation. We invite teachers of writing, and those on college campuses who develop teachers of writing, to unite around a principled agenda for advancing writing. Pedagogical disputes within the reading and mathematics communities frequently have paralyzed progress in these areas. Nothing will faster derail the writing revolution this Commission seeks than the kind of arcane polemics that accompanied the nation's "Reading Wars" of the 1990s. A similar situation in writing must be avoided.

If the writing community can unite behind a broad and commonly understood writing agenda, all Americans can rally to that standard. When they do, American citizens will fully appreciate the tribute to the power of the written word once delivered by one of the nation's great writers. This is what Abraham Lincoln had to say:

> Writing — the art of communicating thoughts to the mind — is the great invention of the world....Great, very great, in enabling us to converse with the dead, the absent, and the unborn, at all distances of time and space, and great not only in its direct benefits, but its great help to all other inventions.

Great also, in Lincoln's words, in its "help to all other inventions." Of those, the most profound was the invented concept of "America." The United States is a nation, but "America" is an idea, a state of mind. The idea has always revolved around opportunity, possibility, overcoming obstacles, and living one's dreams. A writing revolution can help students seize opportunities, imagine endless possibilities, surmount life's difficulties, and, in living their own dreams, live those of the United States and the world as well.

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5. It is clear, for example, that the research paper, once a rite of passage for high school seniors, is rapidly being abandoned, a victim of time constraints, new state mandates, and a burgeoning emphasis on accountability and assessment. See Center for Survey Research & Analysis, *History Research Paper Study*. November 2002.

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9. NAEP, funded by the U.S. Department of Education, periodically assesses nationally representative samples of students in grades 4, 8, and 12. In 1998, it released a comprehensive assessment of students' writing proficiency. Students were asked to produce written samples, appropriate to their grade level, of three different kinds: narrative, informative, and persuasive. A fourth-grader might be asked to write a narrative about a castle; an eighth-grader an informative essay about designing an educational program; and a twelfth-grader a persuasive argument about the importance of voting.

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