

The State of Writing Instruction in America's Schools: What Existing Data Tell Us

Arthur N. Applebee
Judith A. Langer



Center on English Learning & Achievement
University at Albany
State University of New York
1400 Washington Avenue, Albany, NY 12222
<http://cela.albany.edu>

2006

A Collaboration among the National Writing Project, the College Board, and the Center
on English Learning & Achievement

Executive Summary

How well are students learning to write? Has achievement been improving or declining over the past several decades? How well are the nation's students being prepared to meet the writing demands of the workplace and of higher education? To what extent do existing patterns of student writing in the academic subjects reflect recent recommendations about the teaching of writing, particularly those of the National Commission on Writing (2003)? These are critical questions in this era where student achievement is front and center on the national agenda (e.g., NCLB), but policy decisions are too often made without considering the importance of students' writing proficiency to overall achievement across subject areas. The National Study of Writing Instruction has begun to address such questions through analyses of existing data sets, particularly those from the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP), which include background questions on instructional practices in U.S. middle and high schools.

NAEP was never designed to answer such questions. It originated in 1969 as a way for Congress to receive reports on student performance across subject areas across the nation. Since NAEP was not meant to be a report of particular school or student performance, the focus has been on broad patterns of performance in a given year and also over time across the nation as a whole, including comparisons of performance for groups defined by geographical regions, race/ethnicity, and grade level. Schools are selected based on a stratified random sampling procedure to insure that the results are representative of the nation.

NAEP assessments in all subject areas ask a series of background questions completed by administrators, teachers, and students about key features of the school, classroom curriculum and instruction, home and community background, and teachers' preparation. These data offer an opportunity to examine the kinds of writing experiences and instruction being offered to varying populations of students and to relate these to student performance. However, because these background questions have never been a main focus of the NAEP assessments, the data sets available to analyze are inconsistent in the questions included and even in the years in which data were collected: They yield a mosaic rather than a tightly designed portrayal of instruction and achievement over time and across grade levels.

Long-term trend data for both writing and reading show a remarkable stability in levels of achievement over time. Despite small ups and downs, by and large, student writing proficiency has kept steady. Gaps between more-advantaged and less-advantaged students also continue, even with a slight upturn in writing achievement between 1998 and 2002 at Grades 4 and 8.

Data over time also suggest that there has been some increase in emphasis on writing and the teaching of writing, both in English language arts classrooms and across the curriculum, although this may have begun to decline from its high. Further, while process-oriented writing instruction has dominated teachers' reports at least since 1992,

what teachers mean by this and how it is implemented in their classrooms remains unclear. The consistent emphasis that emerges in teachers' reports may mask considerable variation in actual patterns of instruction (see Langer & Applebee, 1987).

What is clear is that even with some increases over time, many students are not writing a great deal for any of their academic subjects, including English, and most are not writing at any length. Two-thirds of students in Grade 8, for example, are expected to spend an hour or less on writing for homework each week, and 40% of twelfth graders report never or hardly ever being asked to write a paper of 3 pages or more. Although short, focused writing is also important, such more extended writing is necessary to explore ideas or develop arguments in depth. Further, there are strong patterns of differential instruction based on teachers' notions of what higher- and lower- performing students can be expected to do.

The NAEP data also highlight some external forces that are impacting the teaching of writing, in particular the spread of state standards and accompanying high stakes tests. In some cases, these may be shifting attention away from a broad program of writing instruction toward a much narrower focus on how best to answer particular types of test questions.

Advances in technology have made word processing tools and Internet resources widely available, and students report making extensive use of them in their writing. At the same time, new genres and forms of publication have emerged that integrate a variety of media and capitalize on the flexibility of hypertext. From instant messages to web pages to blogs to embedded graphics and videos, these changes are certainly having an impact on students' writing experiences, though they do not yet appear in NAEP background questions.

Education has been high on the nation's agenda since at least the mid 1990s with the national standards movement, followed by NCLB. But where has this taken us? On the front page of the March 26th *New York Times* (Dillon, 2006) was an article headlined, "Schools Cutting Back to Teach Reading and Math." Writing was not mentioned. Despite national concern for overall student achievement, writing may be in danger of dropping from attention. The analyses of NAEP data reported here suggest that this may already be the case.

Overall, this study leaves us with some disturbing findings about how little time many students are spending on writing, but it also leaves us with more questions than answers. Key questions still to be addressed include:

- How are students helped to understand the social and disciplinary demands of the different forms of writing they encounter? This includes questions about the audiences and purposes for the tasks in which students engage across grades and subject areas, as well as questions about the instruction that accompanies these tasks.

- What has been the effect of the rapid spread of new technologies on students' writing and writing processes? This includes questions about the use of commonly available tools such as word processors and the Internet, as well as questions about evolving definitions of "text" as new genres and forms of publication emerge that integrate a variety of media and make use of new technology platforms.
- To what extent have new technologies, genres, and platforms that play significant roles in society and the workplace been integrated into instruction across grades and subject areas? This includes questions about differential expectations and patterns of instruction that may be related to socioeconomic status, gender, or race/ethnicity, as well as questions about the influence of state and district policies on what and how students learn.

A large-scale study of schools across the country is needed to answer these questions and lay out a national agenda for writing instruction, one that ensures that all students are being prepared to write well. This is critical not only to their success in school, but also for their later success in higher education and the workplace.

Table of Contents

Executive Summary.....	i
Introduction.....	1
How Well Do Students Write?.....	2
Time on Writing and Writing Instruction.....	5
Amount of Writing for English Language Arts.....	5
Writing across the Curriculum.....	13
Writing for Homework.....	15
Use of Technology to Support Writing Instruction.....	17
Teachers and Professional Development.....	20
Approaches to Instruction.....	23
Conclusion.....	27
Acknowledgements.....	29
References.....	30

Introduction

How well are students learning to write? Has achievement been improving or declining over the past several decades? How well are the nation's students being prepared to meet the writing demands of the workplace and of higher education? To what extent do existing patterns of student writing in the academic subjects reflect recent recommendations about the teaching of writing, particularly those of the National Commission on Writing (2003)? These are critical questions in this era where student achievement is front and center on the national agenda (e.g., NCLB), but policy decisions are too often made without considering the importance of students' writing proficiency to overall achievement across subject areas. The National Study of Writing Instruction has begun to address such questions through analyses of existing data sets, particularly those from the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP), which include background questions on instructional practices in U.S. middle and high schools.

NAEP was never designed to answer such questions. It originated in 1969 as a way for Congress to receive reports on student performance across subject areas across the nation. Since NAEP was not meant to be a report of particular school or student performance, the focus has been on broad patterns of performance in a given year and also over time across the nation as a whole, including comparisons of performance for groups defined by geographical regions, race/ethnicity, and grade level. Schools are selected based on a stratified random sampling procedure to insure that the results are representative of the nation.

From 1970 to 1979, NAEP writing assessments had items of variable length, from a few minutes for completing forms to nearly 30 minutes on some essay tasks. The move to a balanced incomplete block design (BIB spiraling) in the 1984 assessment reduced the maximum time to 15 minutes. Beginning with the 1992 assessment, this was increased to 25 minutes (with a subset of 50 minute writing tasks that was eliminated in the 2002 assessment). In the 2002 assessment, each student completed two 25 minute writing tasks and a short set of background items, in a pattern that allows estimates of performance on all tasks, as well as estimates of the relationships among tasks. The writing prompts tap student performance on informative, persuasive and imaginative writing. The writing is scored using focused holistic scoring that takes into account a variety of aspects of writing achievement.

NAEP assessments in all subject areas ask a series of background questions completed by administrators, teachers and students about key features of the school, classroom curriculum and instruction, home and community background, and teachers' preparation. These data offer an opportunity to examine the kinds of writing experiences and instruction being offered to varying populations of students and to relate these to student performance. However, because these background questions have never been a main focus of the NAEP assessments, the data sets available to analyze are inconsistent in the questions included and even in the years in which data were collected: They yield a mosaic rather than a tightly designed portrayal of instruction and achievement over time and across grade levels.

The most recent writing assessment was in 2002, with the next scheduled for 2007; reading, on the other hand, has been assessed much more often, and more recently. Complicating the picture even more, there are two assessment plans in each subject area, on different time schedules: a long-term trend assessment that tries to keep the assessment unchanged to allow the best estimates of changes over time, and periodic cross-sectional assessments in which tasks and background questionnaires change fairly rapidly in response to emerging issues in policy and practice. In writing, the long-term trend assessment was terminated after 1996 because of concerns about the quality of the data. There are also variations from assessment to assessment in the subject areas in which the most background data are gathered; in writing, for example, the last extensive set of teacher questionnaires accompanied the 1998 assessment, though some data for Grade 8 are available for 2002. Based on the available data, the analyses that we report here yield a national portrait from which some important patterns of instruction and performance emerge. These raise serious questions about the state of writing instruction particular groups of students are receiving, and point to a clear need for further research into the kinds of writing instruction being offered, to whom, and how.

How Well Do Students Write?

Overall, since 1971, student literacy achievement has been holding steady. Using achievement level standards developed by the National Assessment of Educational Progress, the National Commission on Writing (2003) points out that while most students have mastered the basics, few can create prose that is “precise, engaging, and coherent” (p. 16), approximately equivalent to what NAEP calls “proficient.” Looking more broadly at NAEP data makes it clear both how deeply ingrained this pattern is, and how widespread are the inequities in achievement. Figure 1 summarizes long-term trends in literacy achievement on a 0-500 scale that allows comparisons over time and across grades. The most complete data are for reading achievement across the period 1971-2004 (the last long-term trend reading assessment for which data are available); results for a similar set of measures of writing achievement for the 12-year period from 1984 to 1996 are superimposed (in Figure 1) on those for reading. Although some year-to-year fluctuations in both reading and writing achievement are statistically significant, the most striking aspect of the chart is how steady the performance has been over time.

Trends in Literacy Achievement: 1971-2004

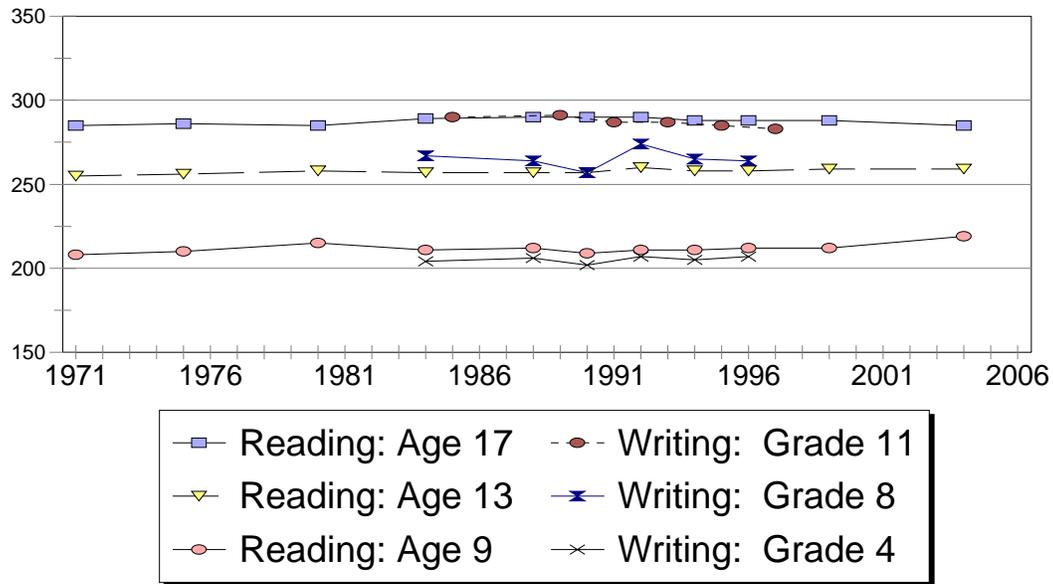


Figure 1. Source: U.S. Department of Education, Institute of Education Sciences, National Center for Education Statistics, National Assessment of Educational Progress, Long-Term Trend Assessment in Reading; writing results from Campbell, Voelki, & Donahue, 1997.

The attempt to maintain a long-term trend line in writing was abandoned after 1996 because of measurement problems: There were too few items in the trend assessment to yield accurate results. Because of this, results from the writing assessments in 1998 and 2002 (the most recent writing assessment) were reported on a different scale (0-300) that does not allow comparison across grades. Using this scale, short-term trends, over the four years from 1998 to 2002, show significant gains in writing achievement at Grades 4 and 8, but no significant change at Grade 12, for the nation or for specific subgroups. Figures 2, 3, and 4 also highlight the large gaps remaining between the achievement of richer and poorer students, and among groups defined by race/ethnicity. Although some growth seems to have taken place in writing at the lower grades, the achievement gaps for Black and Hispanic students and those eligible for free or reduced-price lunch remain relatively the same as four years earlier.

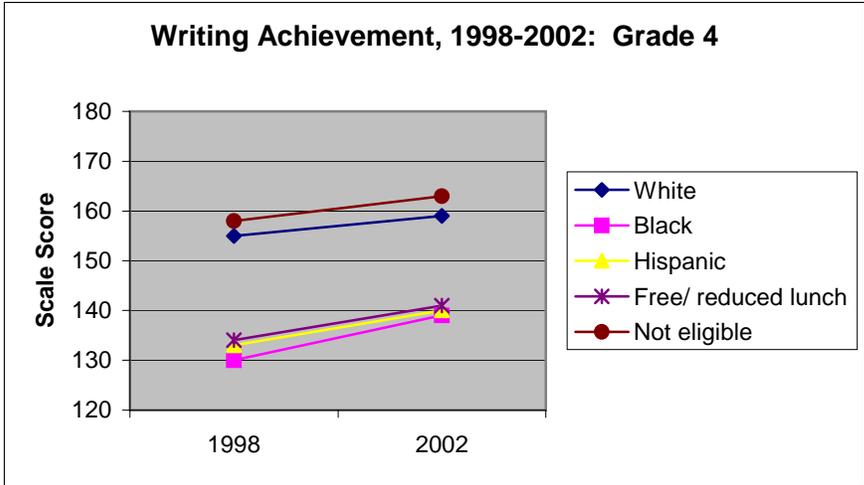


Figure 2. Source: U.S. Department of Education, Institute of Education Sciences, National Center for Education Statistics, National Assessment of Educational Progress, 1998 and 2002 Writing Assessments.

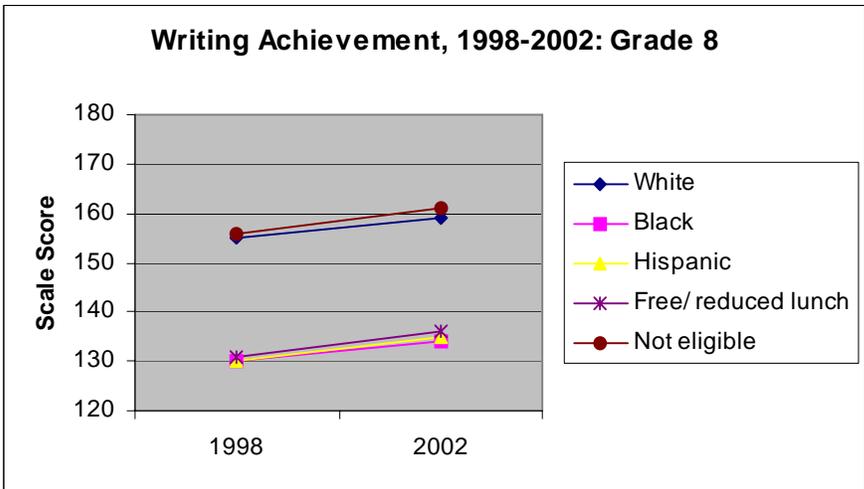


Figure 3. Source: U.S. Department of Education, Institute of Education Sciences, National Center for Education Statistics, National Assessment of Educational Progress, 1998 and 2002 Writing Assessments.

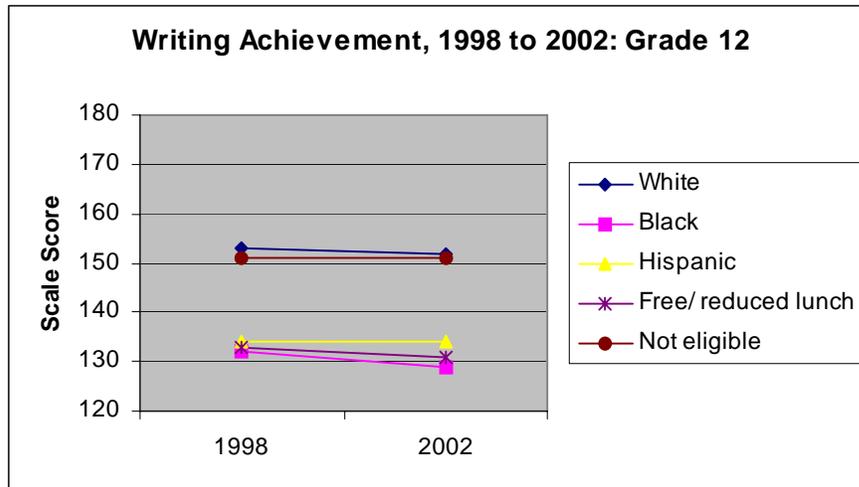


Figure 4. Source: U.S. Department of Education, Institute of Education Sciences, National Center for Education Statistics, National Assessment of Educational Progress, 1998 and 2002 Writing Assessments.

Time on Writing and Writing Instruction

The National Commission on Writing (2003) emphasized the importance of devoting more time to writing instruction, recommending that the amount of time students spend writing should be at least doubled, that writing should be assigned across the curriculum, and that more out-of-school time should be used to encourage writing, including parents reviewing students’ writing with them. Available data provide some information on how much writing students are currently doing, in English language arts as well as in other subject areas, and on how much homework is being assigned.

Amount of Writing for English Language Arts

There are several different dimensions to consider in estimating how much attention is being given to writing instruction in American classrooms today. These include instructional time directly focused on writing, the frequency with which students are asked to write, and the variety and difficulty of the assignments they are given.

In 1978, 9% of Grade 8 students reported that *none* of their time in English class was spent on writing instruction; when asked a related question in 2002, only 4% reported spending 0-10% of their language arts time on writing instruction, suggesting some increase across that time period. Figure 5 summarizes the proportion of 8th grade language arts instruction focused on student writing, according to teacher reports between 2002 and 2005.¹ (These more recent teacher data come from NAEP assessments of reading, which included questions on other aspects of language arts instruction.) In 2005, 48% of students spent 11-40% of time on writing instruction, with 11% spending less.

¹ All NAEP analyses focus on the student; even teacher-provided data are summarized as “the percent of students who had teachers who....”

Across this three-year period, these reports indicate a small but consistent reduction in the amount of time devoted to writing, with increases in the percentages for between 0 and 40% of time, and decreases in the percentages for 41% or more time. This decrease may be related to the increased focus on high stakes test performance, which sometimes leads to a focus on more restricted tasks (see Langer, 2004).

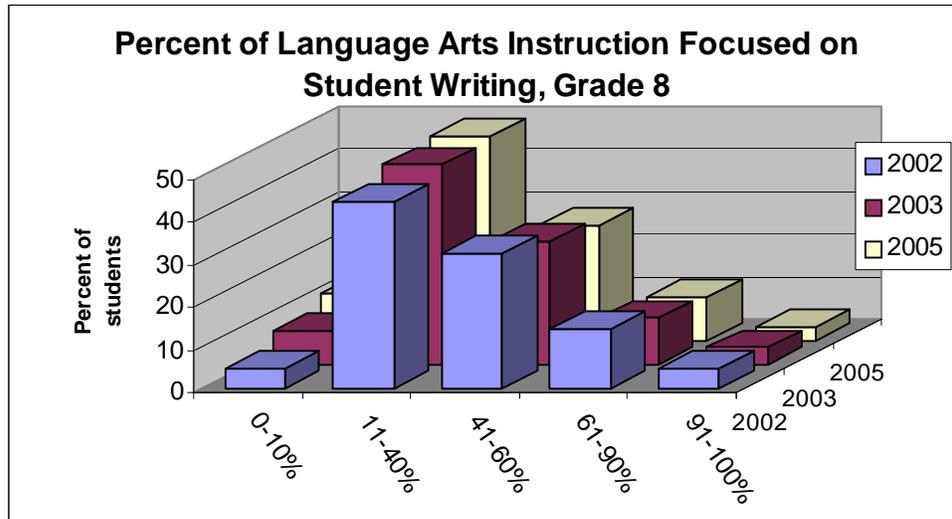


Figure 5. Source: U.S. Department of Education, Institute of Education Sciences, National Center for Education Statistics, National Assessment of Educational Progress, 2002, 2003, and 2005 Reading Assessments.

There was very little variation by subgroups of students (Figure 6), though Black and Hispanic students were somewhat more likely to spend more than 60% of class time on writing instruction. This may reflect increased emphasis on writing instruction for students who are performing less well: Across subgroups, higher levels of writing achievement are associated with classrooms in which teachers spend about half their time on helping students learn to write (Figure 7).

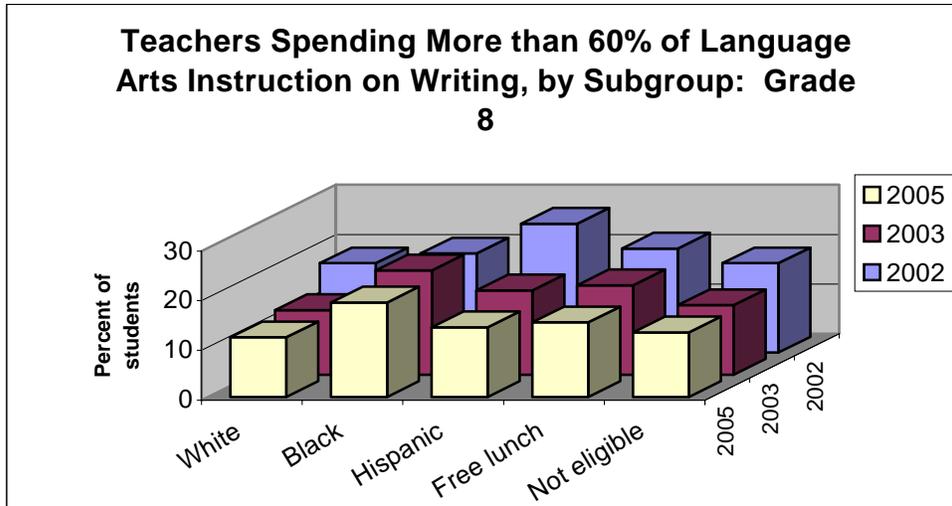


Figure 6. Source: U.S. Department of Education, Institute of Education Sciences, National Center for Education Statistics, National Assessment of Educational Progress, 2002, 2003, and 2005 Reading Assessments.

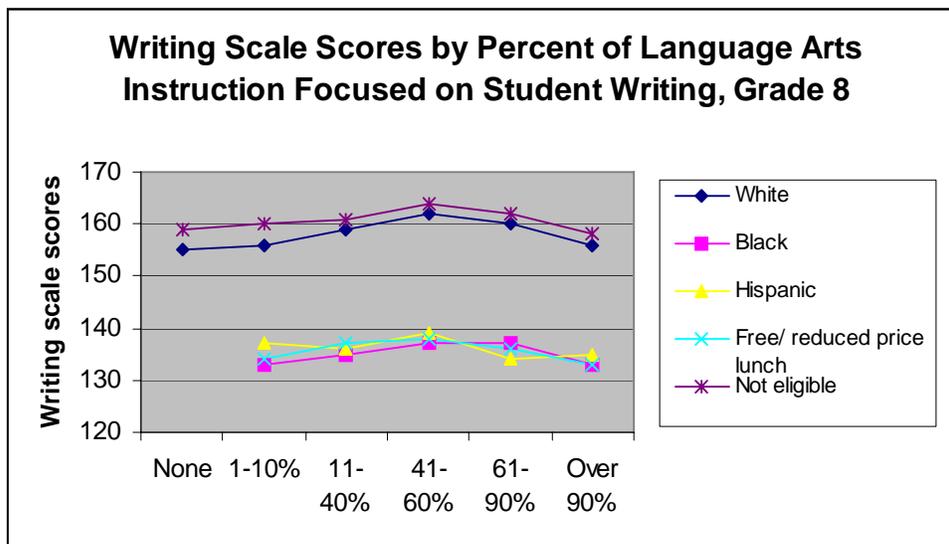


Figure 7. Source: U.S. Department of Education, Institute of Education Sciences, National Center for Education Statistics, National Assessment of Educational Progress, 2002 Writing Assessment.

Comparable teacher reports are not available at Grade 12, but data are available from students on frequency of writing across grades 8 and 12. Their reports are summarized in Figure 8, for a range of types of writing. At Grade 8, over half report being asked at least monthly to write essays involving analysis or interpretation, to write simple summaries of things they have read, and to report on things they have studied or researched. Just under half report regularly writing in a log or journal, writing a letter or essay to persuade someone about something, and writing stories about real or imagined experience. By Grade 12, the focus of the writing reported has narrowed a bit, with two-thirds reporting regular analysis and interpretation, and only one-third reporting regular story writing.

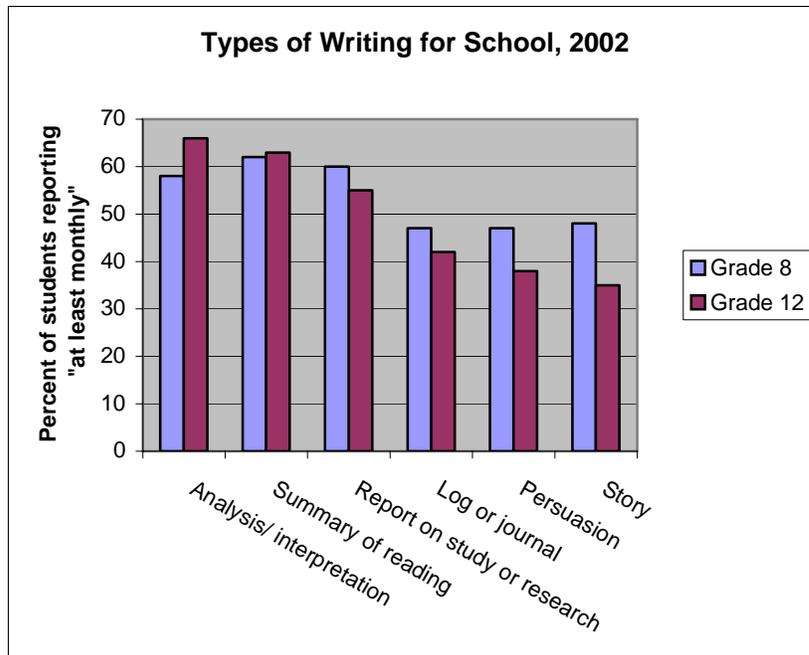


Figure 8. Source: U.S. Department of Education, Institute of Education Sciences, National Center for Education Statistics, National Assessment of Educational Progress, 2002 Writing Assessment.

Another way to look at these data, however, is to note that over 40% of the students at Grade 8 and a third at Grade 12 report writing essays requiring analysis or interpretation at most a few times a year. This is problematic since it is this type of more complex writing that is needed for advanced academic success in high school as well as college coursework.

Figures 9 and 10 chart the relationship between writing frequency and writing achievement for the various types of writing at Grades 8 and 12. In general, students who reported doing at least some writing had higher writing achievement than did those who reported never or hardly ever writing, but there are differences by task and grade level. At Grade 8, reports of *weekly* story writing, persuasion, and reporting on things studied are associated with somewhat lower writing achievement. At Grade 12, the same three types show a negative association with weekly attention, while attention to analysis and interpretation is even more strongly associated with higher achievement than at Grade 8. However, the content of these writing experiences, including the content students are asked to write about in these modes (e.g., the emphasis on personal experience or on academic topics), is not known.

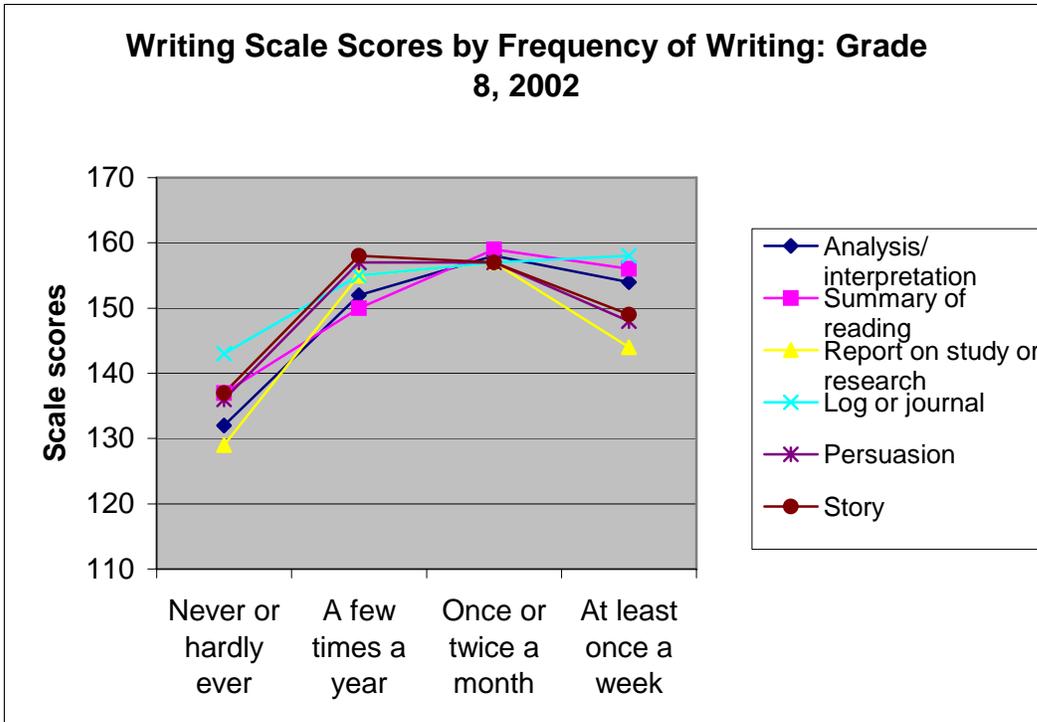


Figure 9. Source: U.S. Department of Education, Institute of Education Sciences, National Center for Education Statistics, National Assessment of Educational Progress, 2002 Writing Assessment.

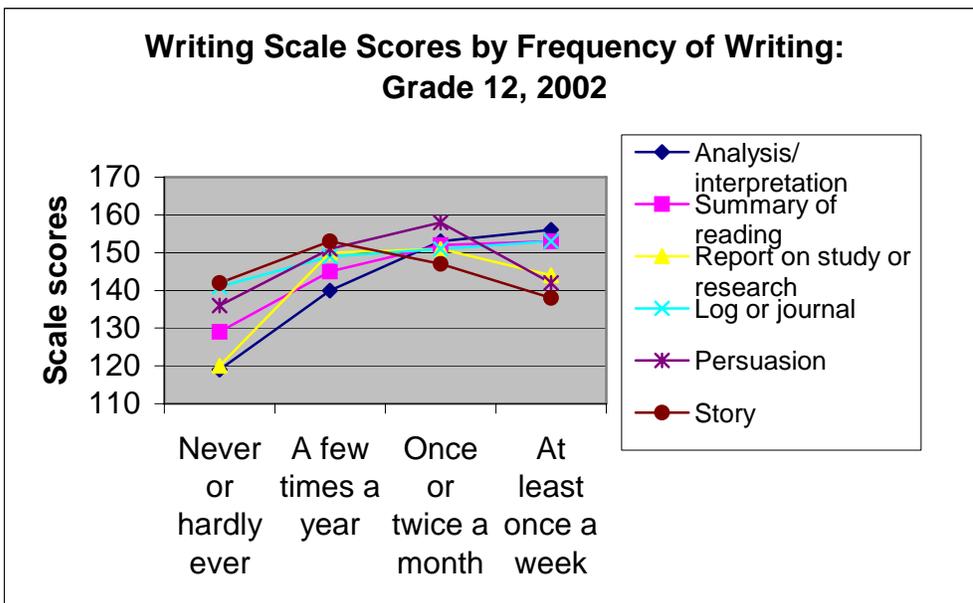


Figure 10. Source: U.S. Department of Education, Institute of Education Sciences, National Center for Education Statistics, National Assessment of Educational Progress, 2002 Writing Assessment.

Student reports indicate some differential patterns of emphasis for different groups of students (Figures 11 and 12). At both Grades 8 and Grade 12, White students report slightly less emphasis on all types of writing than do their Black and Hispanic peers. This parallels teachers' reports of spending more of their instructional time on writing for these groups. Black and Hispanic students also report relatively more emphasis on persuasion and story writing, particularly at Grade 8. Once again, the content and complexity of these writing experiences and the degree of teaching associated with them is not known, but from earlier studies of writing (see Applebee, 1981), it is likely that these traditionally lower-performing students are receiving more writing of a less substantive sort.

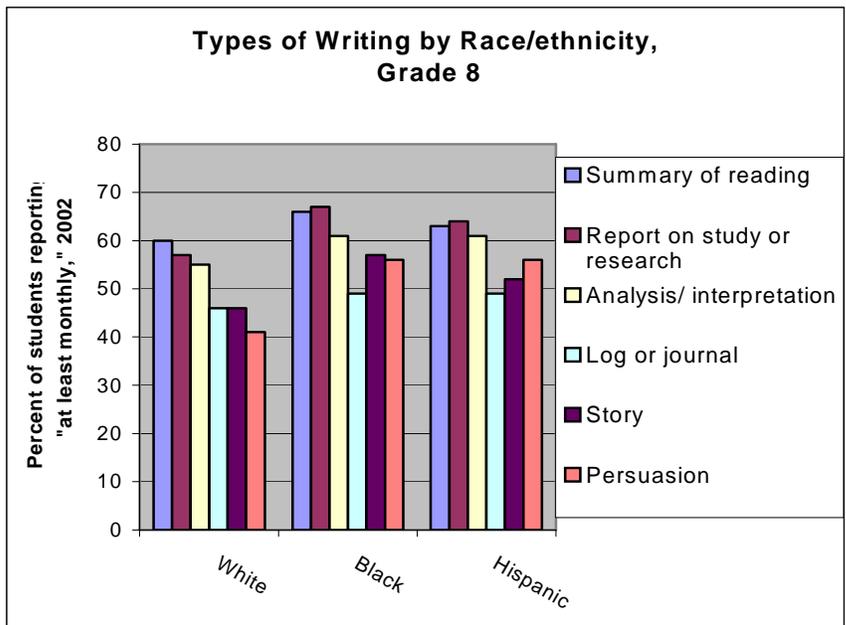


Figure 11. Source: U.S. Department of Education, Institute of Education Sciences, National Center for Education Statistics, National Assessment of Educational Progress, 2002 Writing Assessment.

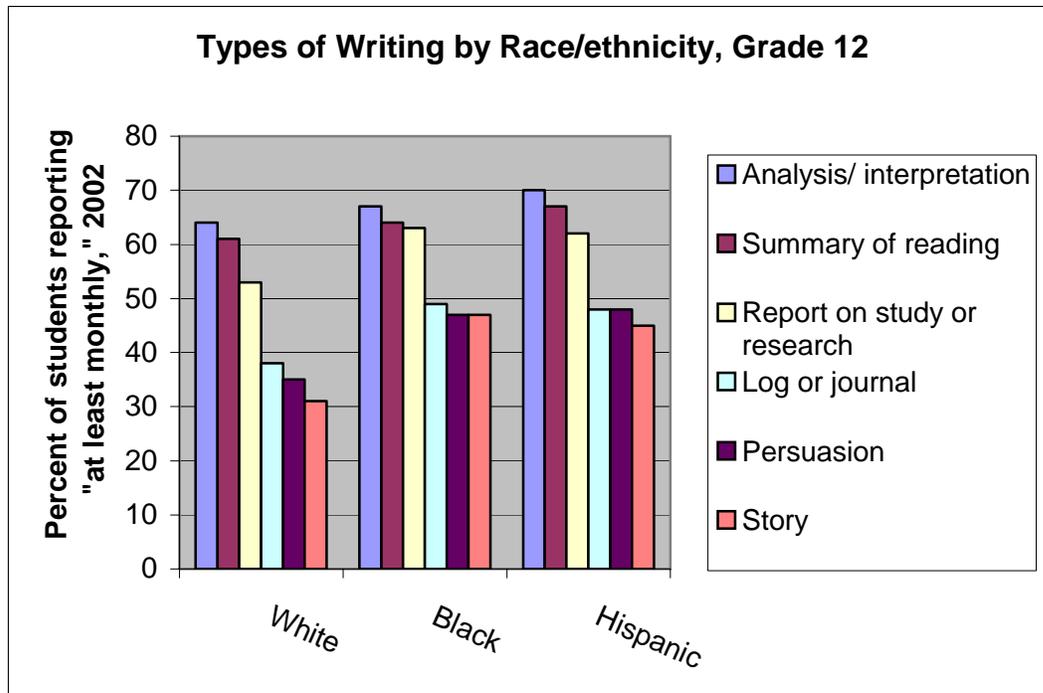


Figure 12. Source: U.S. Department of Education, Institute of Education Sciences, National Center for Education Statistics, National Assessment of Educational Progress, 2002 Writing Assessment.

Long-term trend data for writing, from the period 1984 to 1996, suggest some increase in the amount of writing students were doing over that period. When asked how many essays, compositions, or themes they had written for their English classes during the previous week, 41% of eighth graders in 1984 reported at least one, compared with 55% 12 years later. Similarly at Grade 11, the percentage reporting at least one rose from 60% to 69% across the same time period.

Over a shorter time period, 1988 to 1998, data from another set of questions asked of students and teachers show an increase in requirements for longer writing—papers of 1 to 2 pages and papers of 3 or more pages - particularly at Grade 12. This increase seems to have occurred by 1992, and leveled off after that (Figures 13 and 14). Even in 1998, however, some 40% of 12th grade students reported never or hardly ever writing papers of 3 pages or more for their English language arts classes, and 14 percent were not writing papers of even 1 to 2 pages.

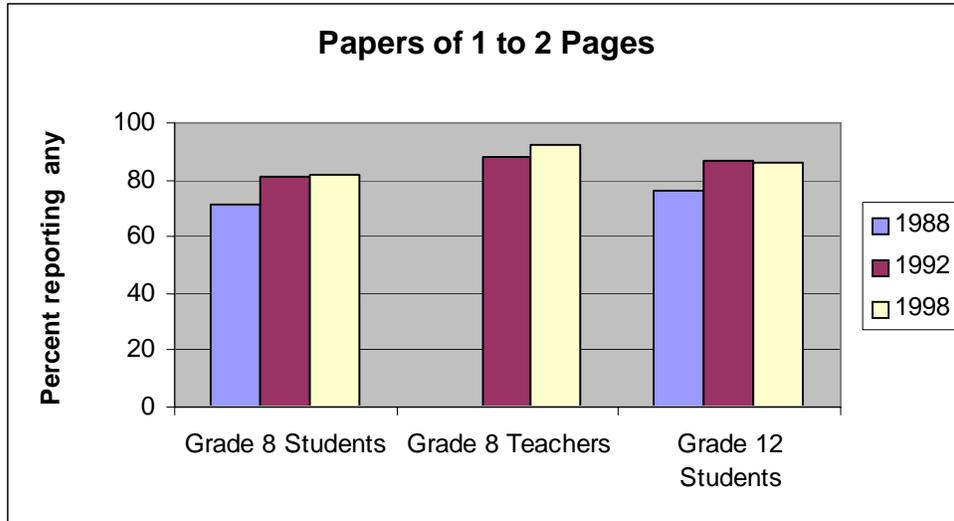


Figure 13. Source: U.S. Department of Education, Institute of Education Sciences, National Center for Education Statistics, National Assessment of Educational Progress, 2002 Writing Assessment. Data for 1988 and 1992 from Applebee et al., 1994, p. 133.

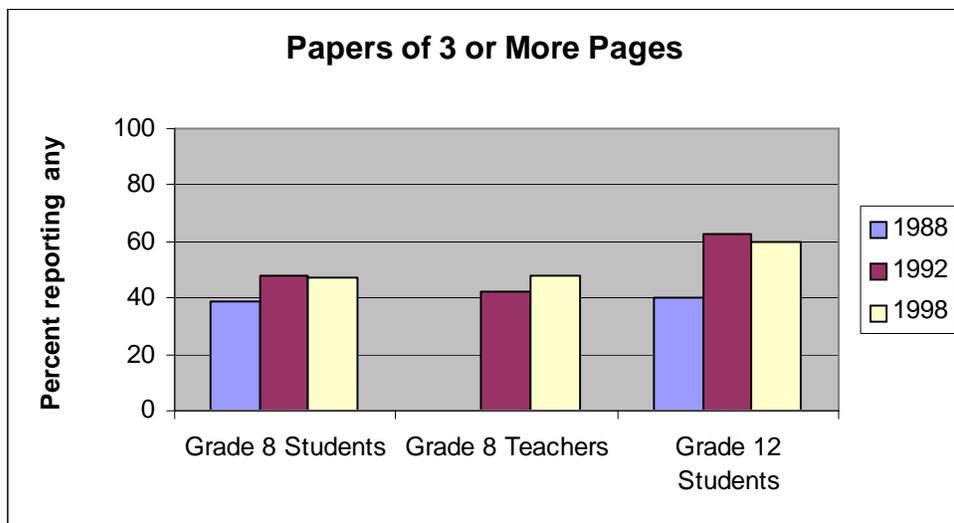


Figure 14. Source: U.S. Department of Education, Institute of Education Sciences, National Center for Education Statistics, National Assessment of Educational Progress, 2002 Writing Assessment. Data for 1988 and 1992 from Applebee et al., 1994, p. 133.

Thus, although over the longer term there has been some increase in the writing students are doing, students seem not to be given assignments requiring writing of any significant length or complexity. This is of particular concern for the college-bound students who will be expected to write even longer papers when they begin their college course work, as well as for those entering better-paying jobs with higher literacy demands in the workforce (American Diploma Project, 2004).

Writing across the Curriculum

The frameworks that guide the individual NAEP assessments clearly indicate the importance of writing across subject areas, with significant emphasis on “constructed responses” (that is, open-ended writing) in National Assessments of reading, civics, geography, U.S. history, foreign languages, mathematics, science, and economics. Such embedded uses of writing in assessments within the various academic disciplines send a strong message about the importance of writing in disciplinary contexts. The U.S. history framework reinforces this message by emphasizing the importance of “ways of knowing and thinking” that are revealed in exploring ideas and conveying relationships within an historical context. Unfortunately, however, the rubrics used to score these assessments typically focus on enumeration of content or identification of relationships, rather than use of appropriate argument structures or overall writing fluency within the discipline, even in history. This may indicate that subject matter experts have not fully thought through the roles that writing plays both as a tool for learning and as an essential part of the intersection of disciplinary content and disciplinary thinking.

Other data from NAEP assessments suggest that students are being asked to produce some in-class writing in the core academic subjects, though the amounts vary considerably (Figure 15). At Grade 8, 71% reported weekly writing assignments in English class, compared with 46% for social studies and 32% for science, and only 13% for mathematics. Curiously, by Grade 12 students were reporting slightly less writing than at Grade 8 in all subjects except English. This may suggest that content area teachers do not necessarily yet see writing as an essential part of disciplinary learning, especially as the content increases in complexity in the later years of schooling.

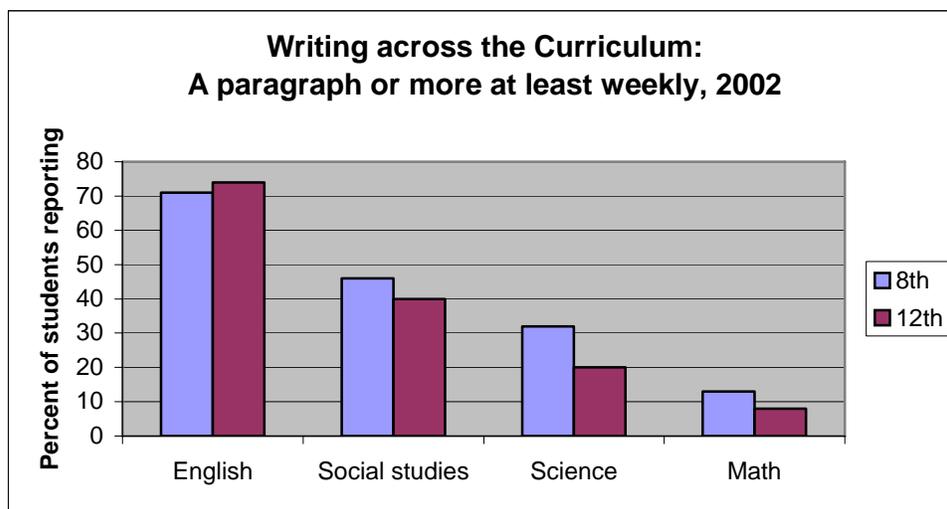


Figure 155. Source: U.S. Department of Education, Institute of Education Sciences, National Center for Education Statistics, National Assessment of Educational Progress, 2002 Writing Assessment.

More surprisingly, at both Grades 8 and 12, 4% of students reported never or hardly ever writing even a paragraph for English, and another 5% reported writing at least a paragraph only a few times a year. Thus 9% of high school students are doing almost no writing at all, even in English.

There is some evidence that the amount of writing across the curriculum has increased in the past decade, although the years and grade levels for which data are available are inconsistent. On the U.S. history assessment, for example, the percentage of 8th grade students who said they *never* wrote reports for history dropped from 31% in 1994 to 26% in 2001, while the percents reporting weekly or monthly assignments went up proportionately. Writing for science at Grade 12 showed a similar increase between the 1996 and 2000 assessments. The percentage of students reporting *never* preparing a written report fell from 53% to 49% across this period, while those reporting such tasks once or twice a month rose from 34% to 37%.

In general, the more frequently students reported writing of paragraph-length or longer, the higher their writing achievement (Figures 16 and 17). The one exception was mathematics, where the highest achievement was associated with reports of writing a few times a year. It may be that at the classroom level, the role of writing in mathematics instruction has not been well conceptualized, even though it figures prominently in mathematics reform documents.

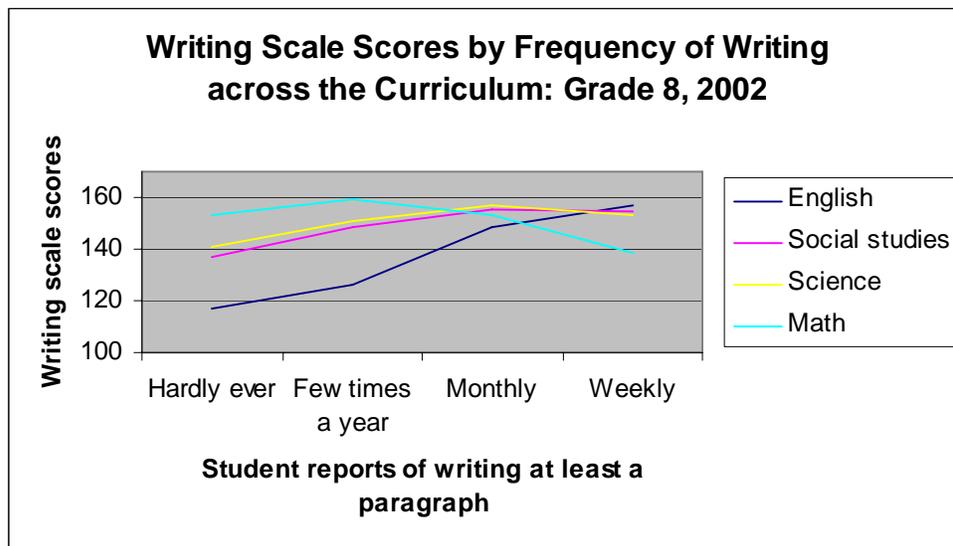


Figure 16. Source: U.S. Department of Education, Institute of Education Sciences, National Center for Education Statistics, National Assessment of Educational Progress, 2002 Writing Assessment.

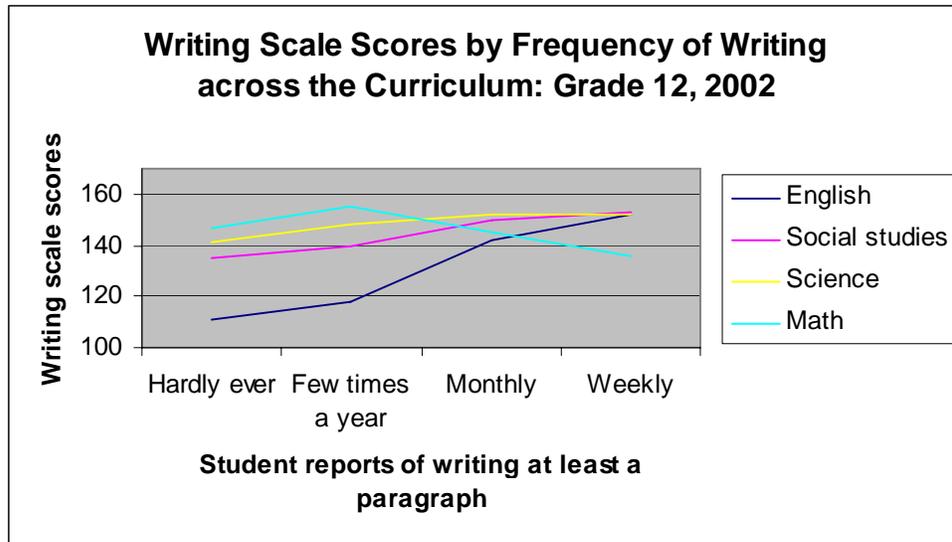


Figure 17. Source: U.S. Department of Education, Institute of Education Sciences, National Center for Education Statistics, National Assessment of Educational Progress, 2002 Writing Assessment.

It is also possible that the national focus on high stakes tests has turned teachers’ attention to students’ retention of specific content rather than to ways students think with and write about that content, despite the fact that studies have shown that certain types of writing can aid students’ understanding and retention of content (Langer & Applebee, 1987).

Writing for Homework

NAEP background items include some that are relevant to the National Commission on Writing’s (2003) recommendation that more homework time should be devoted to writing assignments. Between 1988 and 1998, teachers’ expectations about the amount of time eighth grade students should spend on writing for homework declined somewhat (Figure 18). By 1998, only a small percentage of students had teachers who expected them to spend 3 or more hours a week on writing assignments, and two-thirds had teachers who expected them to spend an hour or less *per week*. Hispanic students were slightly more likely than their peers to have 3 or more hours of writing for homework, but expectations for all groups seem quite low (Figure 19). For all groups, however, higher expectations for writing at home are associated with higher performance on the writing assessment (Figure 20).

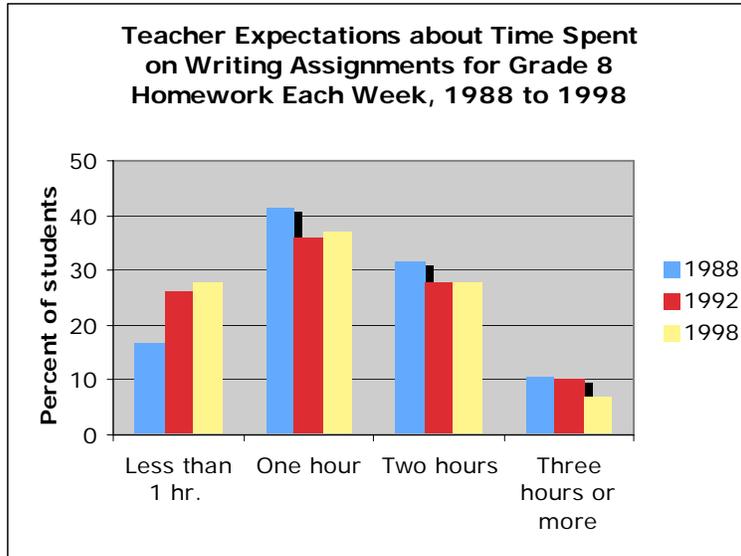


Figure 18. Source: U.S. Department of Education, Institute of Education Sciences, National Center for Education Statistics, National Assessment of Educational Progress, 1998 Writing Assessment. Data for 1988 from Applebee et al, 1990, p. 36; for 1992 from Applebee et al., 1994, p. 130.

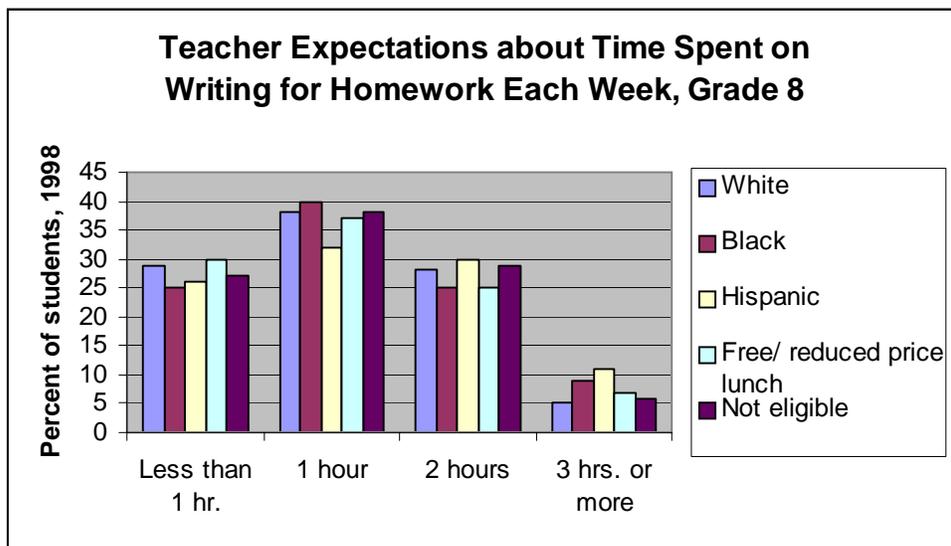


Figure 19. Source: U.S. Department of Education, Institute of Education Sciences, National Center for Education Statistics, National Assessment of Educational Progress, 1998 Writing Assessment.

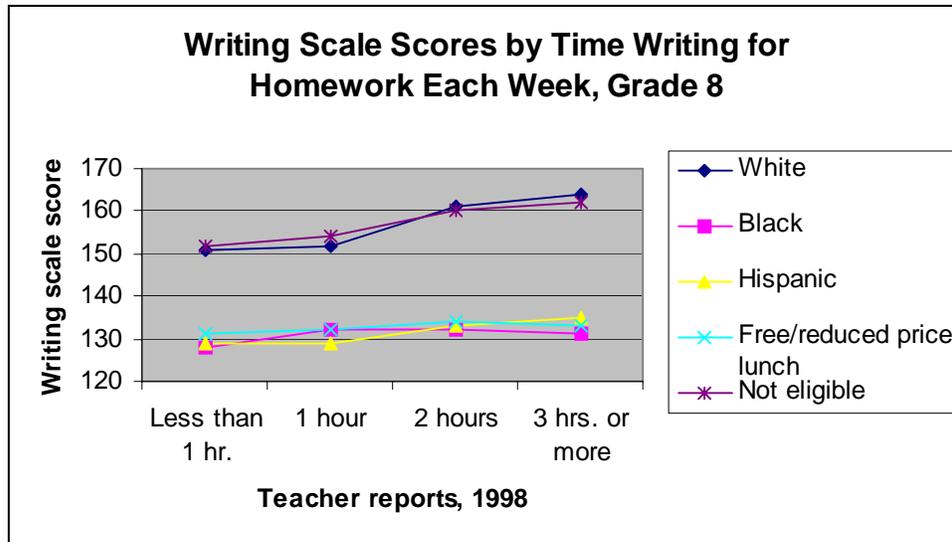


Figure 20. Source: U.S. Department of Education, Institute of Education Sciences, National Center for Education Statistics, National Assessment of Educational Progress, 1998 Writing Assessment.

Although the National Commission on Writing (2003) encouraged parents to review their children’s writing, data from the 1998 assessment suggest few are currently doing so: At Grade 8, only 11 percent of students had teachers who reported *always* asking students to discuss their work with family members, and 26% had teachers who reported *never* doing so.

Use of Technology to Support Writing Instruction

The National Commission on Writing was enthusiastic about the potentially positive effects of technology on writing instruction, and available data suggest that the effects of technology are already apparent in middle and high schools. In the long-term trend assessment, students’ reports of using computers for writing increased dramatically between 1984 and 1996 (Figure 21); by 1996 over 90% of students reported using computers for writing stories or papers.

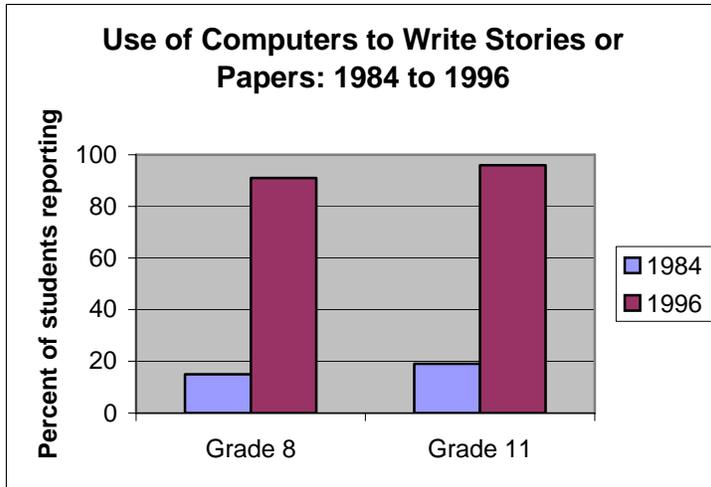


Figure 21. Source: Campbell, Voelki, & Donahue, 1997, p. 191.

After 1996, NAEP began to ask more specific questions about the ways in which computers were being used. Figure 22 summarizes students' reports from 2002. At Grade 8, nearly 60% of students reported that they almost always used the Internet to gather information for their writing assignments, and 47% reported using a computer to edit their drafts (spell checking, cut-and-paste). By Grade 12, regular use of the Internet had risen to 67%, while 71% reported using word processing tools to improve their drafts. Interesting, at both grade levels, somewhat smaller percentages reported using computers for their first drafts. This may reflect lack of access to or usage of computers in their classrooms, with many assignments begun by hand in school and finished up on a computer at home.

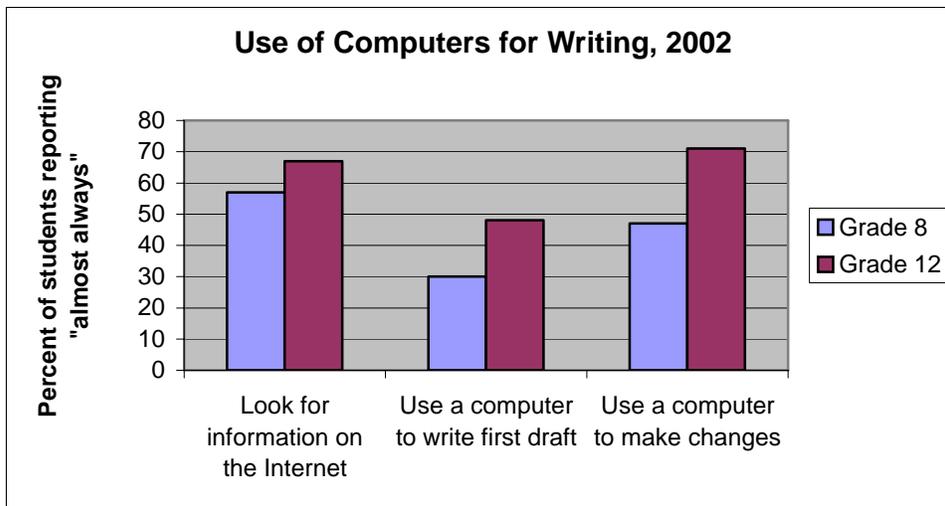


Figure 22. Source: U.S. Department of Education, Institute of Education Sciences, National Center for Education Statistics, National Assessment of Educational Progress, 2002 Writing Assessment.

There are, however, noticeable differences in access to computers for different subgroups of students (Figure 23). At both grades, White and economically more-advantaged students reported more use of computers for writing than did their peers. At the same time, at both grade levels, more frequent use of computers for writing was associated with higher writing achievement (Figures 24 and 25).

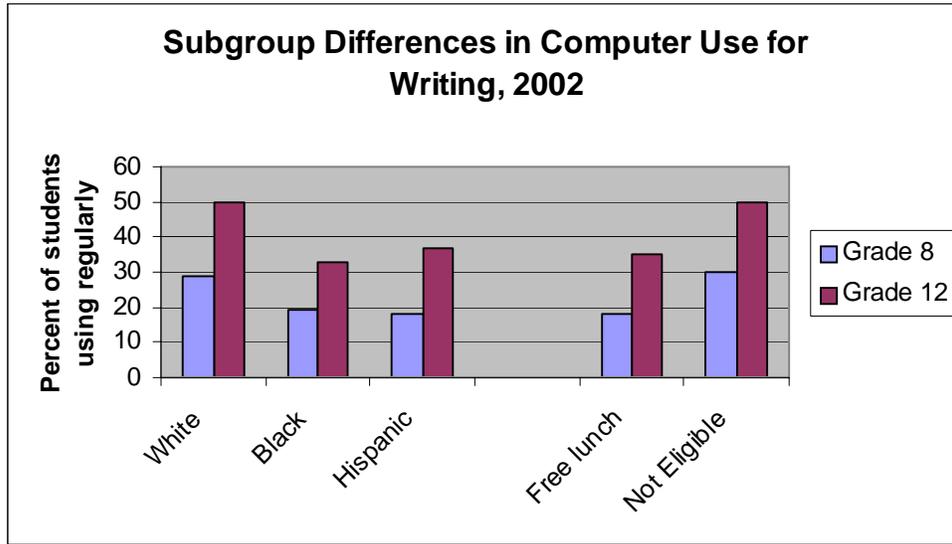


Figure 23. Source: U.S. Department of Education, Institute of Education Sciences, National Center for Education Statistics, National Assessment of Educational Progress, 2002 Writing Assessment.

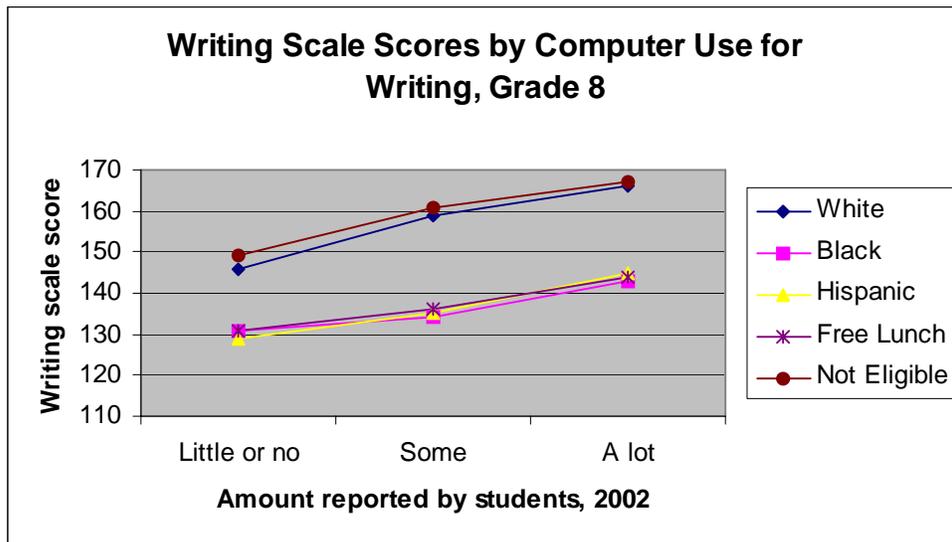


Figure 24. Source: U.S. Department of Education, Institute of Education Sciences, National Center for Education Statistics, National Assessment of Educational Progress, 2002 Writing Assessment.

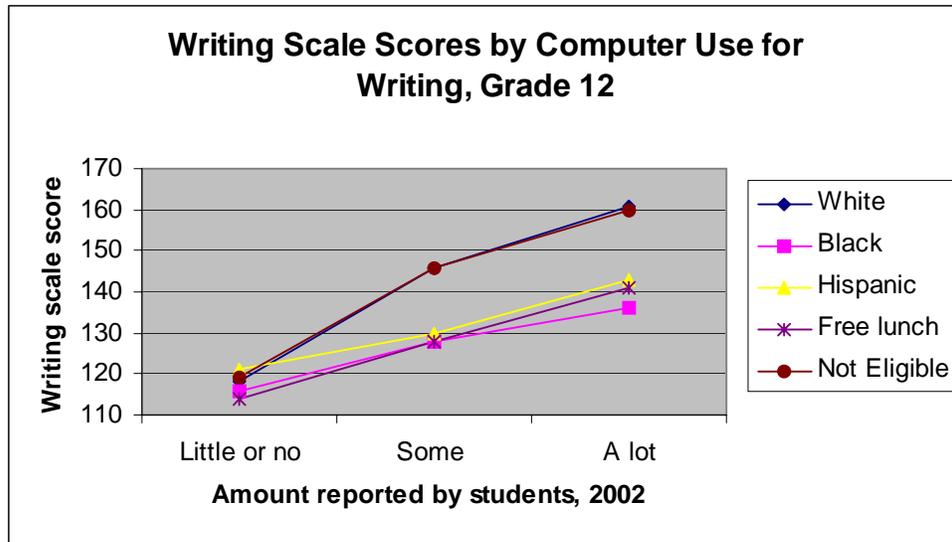


Figure 25. Source: U.S. Department of Education, Institute of Education Sciences, National Center for Education Statistics, National Assessment of Educational Progress, 2002 Writing Assessment.

Teachers and Professional Development

The National Commission on Writing (2003) also recognized the importance of preparing both in-service and pre-service teachers to understand the value of writing and how best to teach it.

In 2002, 78% of Grade 8 students and 69% of Grade 12 students were in schools that reported providing professional development experiences to their teachers emphasizing reading and writing processes (Figure 26). Similar proportions (76% at Grade 8 and 72% at Grade 12) were in schools that reported professional development experiences that emphasized language arts across the curriculum (Figure 27). Another question asked Grade 8 teachers about the characteristics of the professional development experience that had most influenced their teaching. Interestingly, 78% of the students had teachers who cited an experience that emphasized reading or writing processes. This is testimony to how important understanding of underlying literacy processes is to teachers of English language arts.

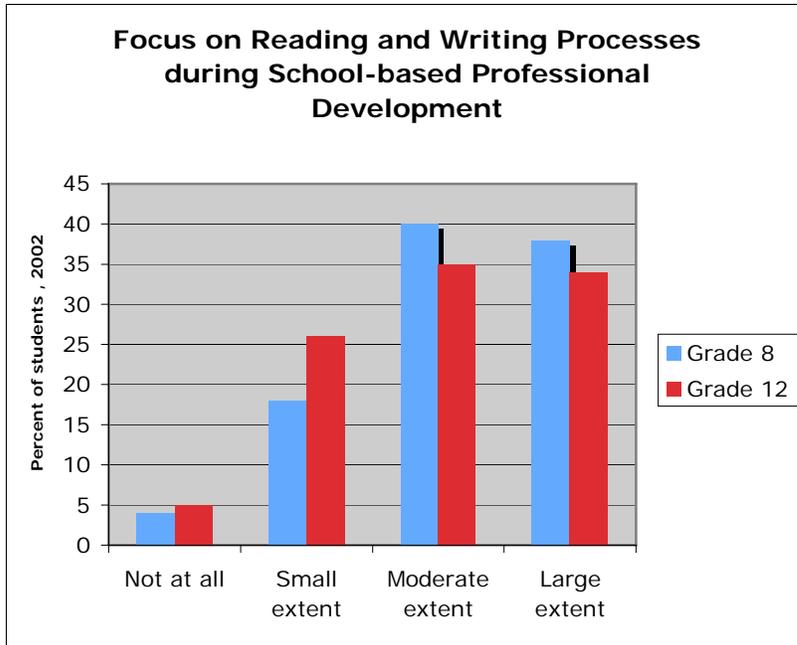


Figure 26. Source: U.S. Department of Education, Institute of Education Sciences, National Center for Education Statistics, National Assessment of Educational Progress, 2002 Writing Assessment.

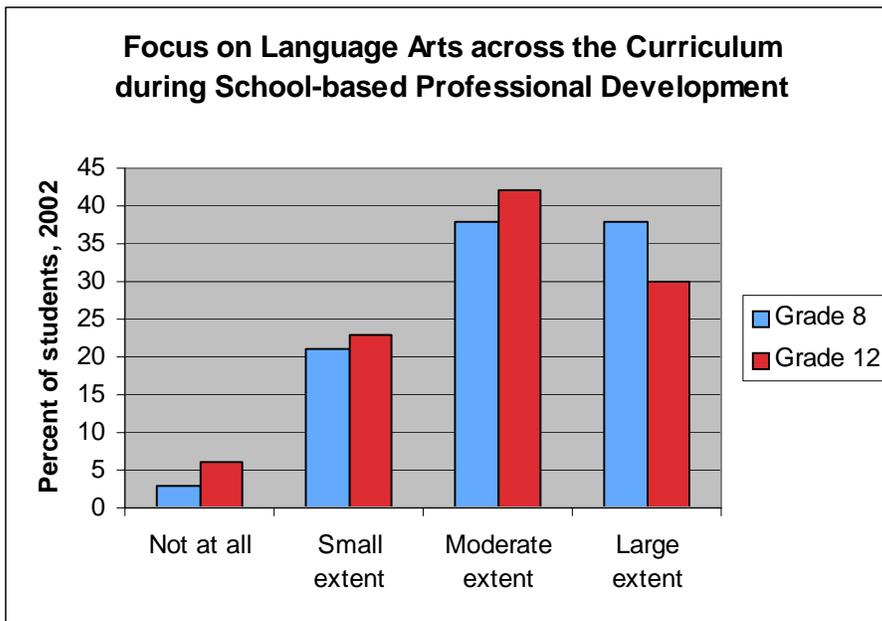


Figure 27. Source: U.S. Department of Education, Institute of Education Sciences, National Center for Education Statistics, National Assessment of Educational Progress, 2002 Writing Assessment.

At both Grades 8 and 12, the great majority of students were in schools in which professional development focused on linking instruction to standards, with slightly greater emphasis at Grade 12 than at Grade 8 (Figure 28). Greater emphasis on linking

standards to instruction was associated with higher writing achievement at Grade 12, though the relationship was not significant at Grade 8 (Figure 29). However, this is a skill most teachers do not have, and need help in doing (Langer 2002; 2004).

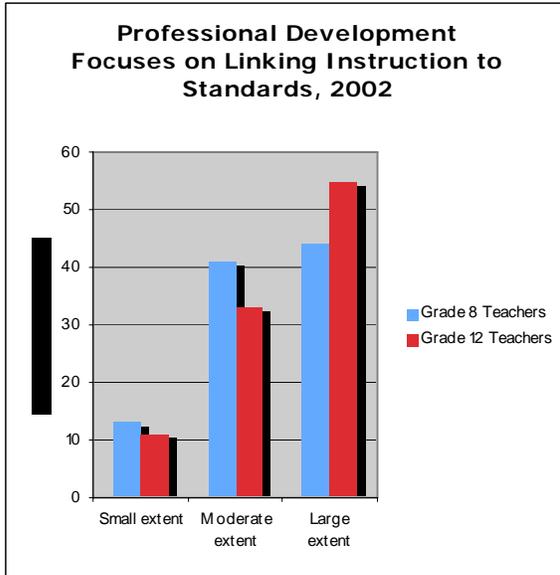


Figure 28. Source: U.S. Department of Education, Institute of Education Sciences, National Center for Education Statistics, National Assessment of Educational Progress, 2002 Writing Assessment.

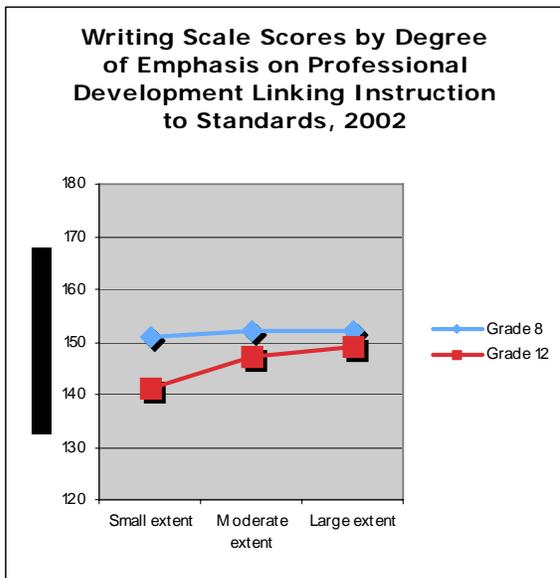


Figure 29. Source: U.S. Department of Education, Institute of Education Sciences, National Center for Education Statistics, National Assessment of Educational Progress, 2002 Writing Assessment.

In 2002, the majority (83%) of Grade 8 students had teachers who also agreed that their state's language arts standards support good teaching, although only 50% had teachers who believed that the accompanying state assessments were good measures of their students' language arts achievement. (These questions were not asked of teachers at Grade 12.)

These data suggest that teachers of English language arts are by and large aware of the usefulness of standards and respond positively to professional development experiences that help them support their students' reading and writing processes. However such learning experiences were not made available to 20 – 30% of the teachers surveyed, and the extent and usefulness of the experiences that were provided are unclear.

Approaches to Instruction

Time and attention to writing instruction are not all that are necessary to improve the teaching of writing. What students are taught also matters.

For at least the last 25 years, the improvement of writing instruction has emphasized teaching students the skills and strategies needed to write effectively in a variety of contexts and disciplines. Such instruction has typically been called process-oriented, and has tended to emphasize extensive prewriting activities, multiple drafts, sharing of work with partners or small groups, and careful attention to writing conventions before sharing with others.

By 1992, process-oriented instruction had become the conventional wisdom, with over 71% of students at Grade 8 in classrooms where the teacher reported that it was a central part of instruction, and another 26% in classrooms using it as a supplemental part; results in 1998 were essentially identical. (Comparable data are not available for 12th Grade, or for 2002). By 1998, the emphasis on process instruction was consistent across subgroups of students defined by race/ethnicity and by eligibility for free or reduced-price lunch.

Although the 2002 assessment did not ask teachers about their emphasis on process-oriented instruction, it does include reports from students on how they approached school writing tasks. Figure 30 summarizes students' reports of how frequently they engaged or were asked to engage in selected strategies for their school writing. Patterns are quite similar at Grades 8 and 12, with 68% reporting that they almost always make changes to fix mistakes, and 39% reporting almost always writing more than one draft. Strategies requiring interaction with others were somewhat less frequent at both grades. Student reports on strategy use showed little variation by subgroup.

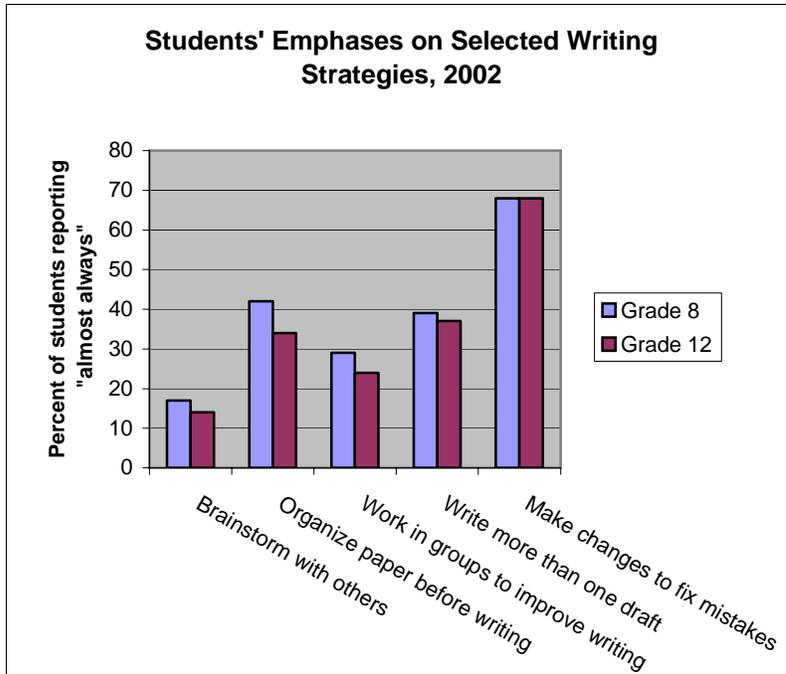


Figure 30. Source: U.S. Department of Education, Institute of Education Sciences, National Center for Education Statistics, National Assessment of Educational Progress, 2002 Writing Assessment.

All of the strategies reported on showed some association with achievement at both grades, though the association for making changes to fix mistakes was by far the strongest (Figures 30 and 31).

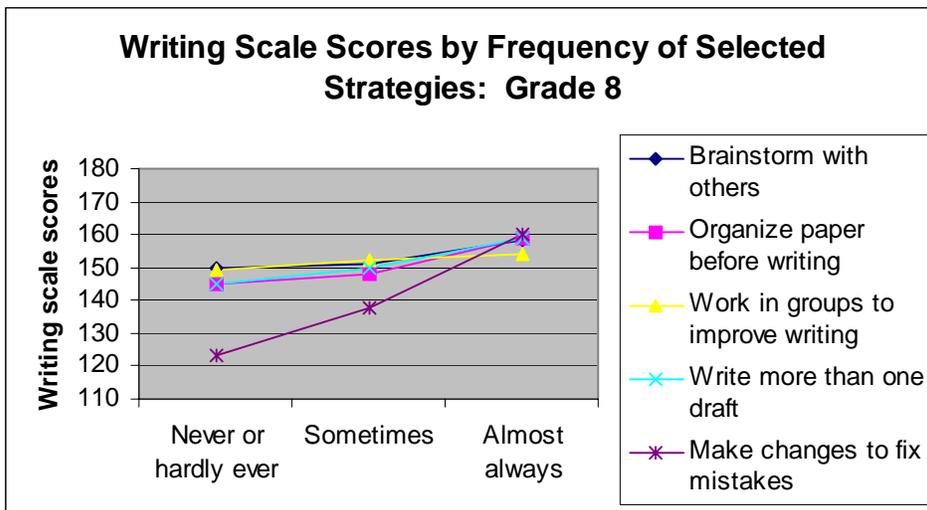


Figure 31. Source: U.S. Department of Education, Institute of Education Sciences, National Center for Education Statistics, National Assessment of Educational Progress, 2002 Writing Assessment.

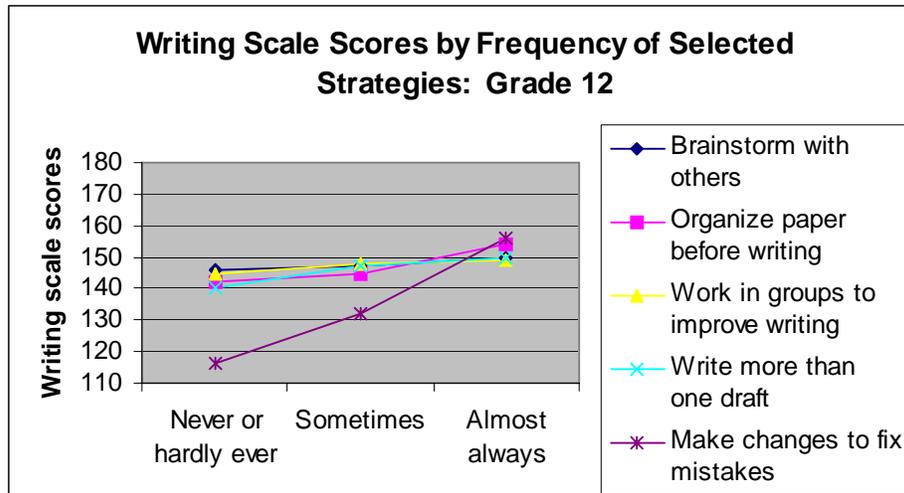


Figure 32. Source: U.S. Department of Education, Institute of Education Sciences, National Center for Education Statistics, National Assessment of Educational Progress, 2002 Writing Assessment.

What students say they do and what they actually do are not always the same. On some of the writing assessments, students were encouraged to use an extra blank page for planning before they began to write, and these pages were scored for the number of different activities students demonstrated. Over time, the use of this prewriting space for NAEP tasks has changed dramatically (Figure 33). In 1984, a few of the assignments in the assessment left a blank page for the students to make notes or outlines, but fewer than 20% of 8th or 11th graders made use of the space. In the 1992, 1998, and 2002 assessments, every task provided room for prewriting. (In 1998 and 2002, during the testing session, students were also given a separate brochure that emphasized the importance of selected planning and revising strategies.) In these later assessments, many more students made at least some use of the space provided. Even with the differences in test administration, students' tendency to do some overt planning before they begin to write seems to have increased across this 18-year time span.

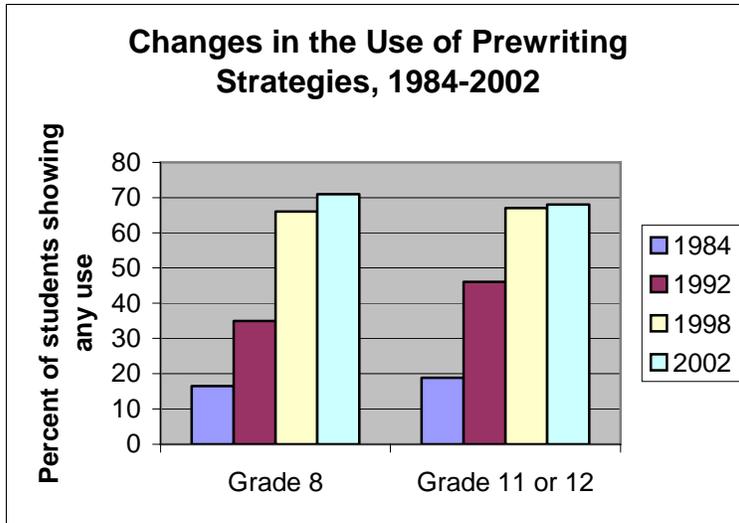


Figure 33. Source: U.S. Department of Education, Institute of Education Sciences, National Center for Education Statistics, National Assessment of Educational Progress, 2002 Writing Assessment. Data for 1984 from Applebee, Langer, & Mullis, 1986, p. 70; for 1992 from Applebee et al., 1994, p. 181; for 1998 from Greenwald et al., 1999, p. 95.

Figure 34 summarizes differences in use of planning by subgroup for 2002. At Grade 8, White students and those not eligible for free or reduced-price lunches made more overt use of prewriting strategies than did their peers. By Grade 12, however, the differences were considerably reduced, but largely because White and not-eligible 12th graders made less use of the prewriting page than did their peers at Grade 8.

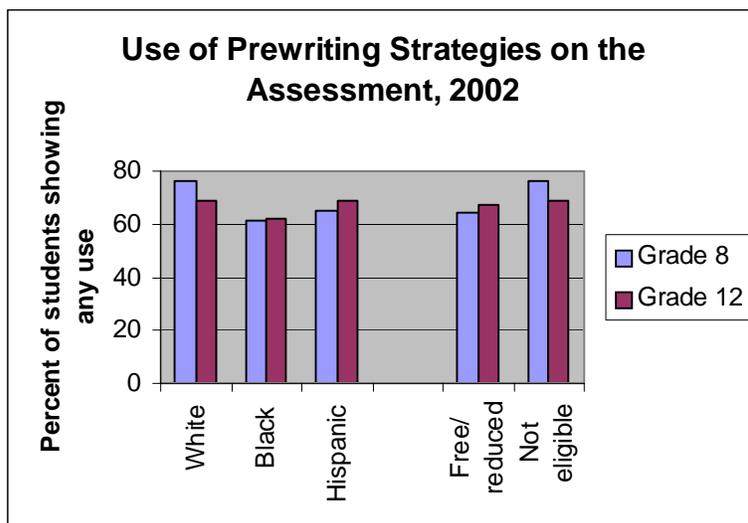


Figure 34. Source: U.S. Department of Education, Institute of Education Sciences, National Center for Education Statistics, National Assessment of Educational Progress, 2002 Writing Assessment.

However, at both grades, taking the time to do some prewriting activities was positively associated with writing achievement (Figures 35 and 36).

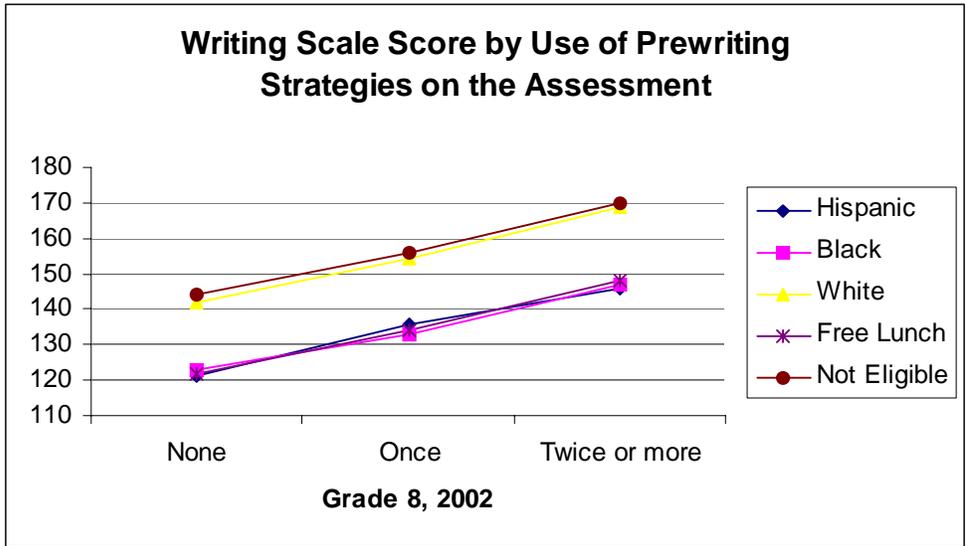


Figure 35. Source: U.S. Department of Education, Institute of Education Sciences, National Center for Education Statistics, National Assessment of Educational Progress, 2002 Writing Assessment.

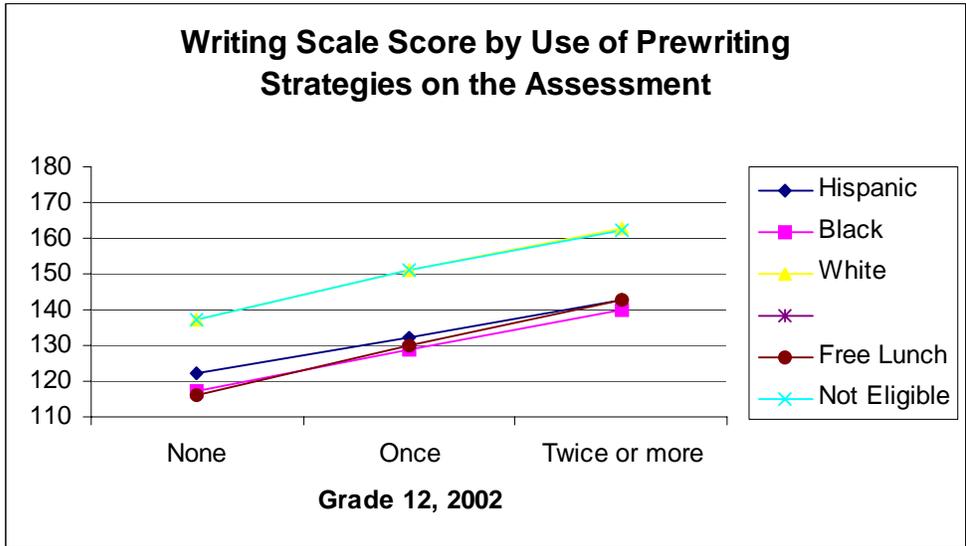


Figure 36. Source: U.S. Department of Education, Institute of Education Sciences, National Center for Education Statistics, National Assessment of Educational Progress, 2002 Writing Assessment.

Conclusion

This look at the state of writing instruction across the curriculum through the lens of data from the National Assessment of Educational Progress leads to a number of conclusions and a great many more questions. Long-term trend data for both writing and reading

show a remarkable stability in levels of achievement over time. Despite small ups and downs, by and large, student writing proficiency has kept steady. Gaps between more-advantaged and less-advantaged students also continue, even with the slight upturn in writing achievement between 1998 and 1992 at Grades 4 and 8.

Data over time also suggest that there has been some increase in emphasis on writing and the teaching of writing, both in English language arts classrooms and across the curriculum, although this may have begun to decline from its high. Further, while process-oriented writing instruction has dominated teachers' reports at least since 1992, what teachers mean by this and how it is implemented in their classrooms remains unclear. The consistent emphasis that emerges in teachers' reports may mask considerable variation in actual patterns of instruction (see Langer & Applebee, 1987).

What is clear is that even with some increases over time, many students are not writing a great deal for any of their academic subjects, including English, and most are not writing at any length. Two-thirds of students in Grade 8, for example, are expected to spend an hour or less on writing for homework each week, and 40% of twelfth graders report never or hardly ever being asked to write a paper of 3 pages or more. Although short, focused writing is also important, such more extended writing is necessary to explore ideas or develop arguments in depth. Further, there are strong patterns of differential instruction based on teachers' notions of what higher- and lower- performing students can be expected to do.

The NAEP data also highlight some external forces that are impacting the teaching of writing, in particular the spread of state standards and accompanying high stakes tests. In some cases, these may be shifting attention away from a broad program of writing instruction toward a much narrower focus on how best to answer particular types of test questions.

Advances in technology have made word processing tools and Internet resources widely available, and students report making extensive use of them in their writing. At the same time, new genres and forms of publication have emerged that integrate a variety of media and capitalize on the flexibility of hypertext. From instant messages to web pages to blogs to embedded graphics and videos, these changes are certainly having an impact on students' writing experiences, though they do not yet appear in NAEP background questions. We do not know the extent to which students have opportunities to engage with the wealth of data available through technology as input for their writing nor the frequency with which they use various uni-modal or multi-modal technologies to carry out school tasks.

Education has been high on the nation's agenda since at least the mid 1990s with the national standards movement, followed by NCLB. But where has this taken us? On the front page of the March 26th *New York Times* (Dillon, 2006) was an article headlined, "Schools Cutting Back to Teach Reading and Math." Writing was not mentioned. We are living in an educational era where reading is often considered content-free, where mathematics skills rather than ways to think about those concepts are front and center,

and where writing seems to have evaporated from public concern. In the March 1st edition of *Education Week*, Kathleen Kennedy Manzo (2006) reported that high school students who aspire to attend college will likely be unprepared to tackle the complex reading and writing tasks they will encounter. A large part of the article was based on an ACT (2006) report that only 51% of the ACT test takers who wished to attend colleges met ACT's college benchmarks in reading. Along with interview comments by experts across the country, Manzo concludes that although there is a rush to bolster math and science, there is reason for concern that reading and writing (and their role in content learning) will be "left out of the mix." Despite national concern for overall student achievement, writing seems to be dropping from attention. The analyses of NAEP data reported here suggest that this may already be the case.

Overall, this study leaves us with some disturbing findings about how little time many students are spending on writing, but it also leaves us with more questions than answers. Key questions still to be addressed include:

- How are students helped to understand the social and disciplinary demands of the different forms of writing they encounter? This includes questions about the audiences and purposes for the tasks students encounter across grades and subject areas, as well as questions about the instruction that accompanies these tasks.
- What has been the effect of the rapid spread of new technologies on students' writing and writing processes? This includes questions about the use of commonly available tools such as word processors and the Internet, as well as questions about evolving definitions of "text" as new genres and forms of publication emerge that integrate a variety of media and make use of new technology platforms.
- To what extent have new technologies, genres, and platforms that play significant roles in society and the workplace been integrated into instruction across grades and subject areas? This includes questions about differential expectations and patterns of instruction that may be related to socioeconomic status, gender, or race/ethnicity, as well as questions about the influence of state and district policies on what and how students learn.

A large-scale study of schools across the country is needed to answer these questions and lay out a national agenda for writing instruction, one that ensures that all students are being prepared to write well. This is critical not only to their success in school, but also for their later success in higher education and the workplace.

Acknowledgements

We appreciate the support provided for this project by The College Board, the National Writing Project, and the University at Albany. Richard Sterling and Judy Buchanan, in particular, identified the need for a new look at the state of writing instruction, and encouraged us to undertake it.

The project has benefited from the efforts of a talented staff of researchers, including Kristen Wilcox, Linda Baker, and Renee Banzhaf, all at the Center on English Learning & Achievement. They each spent long hours exploring the data available in NAEP databases across subject areas, and ways that those data could be used to better understand the state of writing instruction in American middle and high schools.

References

ACT. (2006). *Reading between the lines: What the ACT reveals about college readiness in reading*. Iowa City, IA: ACT.

American Diploma Project. (2004). *Ready or not: Creating a high school diploma that counts*. Washington, DC: Achieve, Inc.

Applebee, A.N. (1981). *Writing in the Secondary School*. Urbana, IL: National Council of Teachers of English.

Applebee, A. N. (1984). *Contexts for learning to write: Studies of secondary school instruction*. Norwood, NJ: Ablex.

Applebee, A. N., Langer, J. A., & Mullis, I. V. S. (1986). *The Writing Report Card: Writing Achievement in American Schools*. Princeton, NJ: Educational Testing Service.

Applebee, A. N., Langer, J. A., Jenkins, L., Mullis, I. V. S., & Foertsch, M. V. (1990). *Learning to write in our nation's schools: Instruction and achievement in 1988 at grades 4, 8, and 12*. Princeton, NJ: Educational Testing Service.

Applebee, A. N., Langer, J. A., Mullis, I. V. S., Latham, A. S., & Gentile, C. A. (1994). *NAEP 1992 writing report card*. Washington, DC: U.S. Government Printing Office for the National Center for Education Statistics, U.S. Department of Education.

Campbell, J. R., Voelki, K. E., & Donahue, P. L. (1997). *NAEP 1996 Trends in Academic Progress*. Washington, DC: National Center for Education Statistics.

Dillon, Sam. (03/26/06). *New York Times*. Schools cutting back subject to teach reading and math, p.1.

Greenwald, E. A., Persky, H. R., Campbell, J. R., & Mazzeo, J. (1999). *NAEP 1998 writing report card for the nation and the states* (No. NCES 1999-462). Washington, DC: U.S. Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics.

Hillocks, G. (2002). *The Testing Trap: How State Writing Assessments Control Learning*. NY: Teachers College Press.

Langer, J.A. (2004). *Getting to Excellent: How to Create Better Schools*. NY: Teachers College Press.

Langer, J.A. & Applebee, A.N. (1987). *How Writing Shapes Thinking*. Urbana, IL: National Council of Teachers of English.

Manzo, K.K. (03/01/06). *Education Week*. Graduates can't master college text, p.1.

National Commission on Writing. (2003). *The neglected "r": The need for a writing revolution*. New York: College Entrance Examination Board.