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# Teachers' Perspectives on the State of Writing in High School English Classrooms

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**Teachers' Perspectives on the State of Writing  
in High School English Classrooms**

by

Jennifer Lynn Meagher

A Thesis

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## **Abstract**

Within the past ten years, the poor condition of writing in American high schools has been lamented in the media and academic studies. Those studies tend to focus on student writing results, student-reported opinions and attitudes, and college professor anecdotal evidence and typically leave out the voices of Minnesota's teachers. This study examines the opinions, attitudes, and practices of English/Language Arts teachers in Minnesota.

The literature review provides background information on national test scores, writing modes, instructional practices, and issues found in writing instruction. The methodology reflects data collection techniques on the key areas of modes and types of writing done, the frequency of writing completed, and what was creating barriers to writing instruction. The findings include discussion of both qualitative and quantitative measures in each of those areas. Finally, suggestions to address issues raised in the findings section are given at teacher, school, professional organization, and governmental levels.

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## Chapter 1: INTRODUCTION

### Rationale and Need for Study

For the past several years, media outlets have lamented a decline in the writing abilities of high school graduates. Results of the National Assessment of Education Progress 2011 gravely showed that only 24 percent of American seniors rated proficient in writing. That statistic lit up the media like wildfire. Building upon that, in 2012, Peg Tyre authored an article for *The Atlantic* that sparked an online debate about the state of writing in American high schools that included a variety of writers and policy makers who questioned what is happening in America's classrooms. Tyre's narrative tells of New Dorp High School, a school plagued by dropouts and abysmal test scores that implemented specific writing strategies and modes of writing that drastically improved writing results and attitudes. Moving from creative writing to academic discourse, it becomes clear through this example that both instruction and pedagogy make a difference in student writing success. With only one limited case study, we can see the potential for additional studies on the problems and solutions to the declining writing abilities of America's graduates. Ultimately, the cause for this decline has largely been speculated; however, few studies investigate the area of origin—what is really happening in the classroom.

Some contend that the decomposition of writing ability of America's graduates is linked to the explosion of social media; others believe social media have created exigency in improving writing skills. A 2003 *USA Today* article hinted that the possible culprit of the decline in writing is “online lingo” (Friess 8D). When youth compose in a digital world, they rely on short cuts in order to rapidly relay messages and place themselves in digital dialogues. Ten years after this article, the Pew Foundation and National Writing Project funded a study that investigated the impact of digital tools on writing and writing instruction. Purcell, Buchanan, and Friedrich

assert that teachers surveyed were concerned with “diminishing grammatical skills and vocabulary” (35) and that “digital tools actually blur the boundaries between formal and informal audiences” (24). Further speculation on why American’s cannot write was recently made by *The New York Times* contributor Natalie Wexler in September 2015. Using negative results of a national study to bolster her argument, Wexler contends that writing ability is more important now than ever as we become more digitally reliant and that the greatest reason for the poor state of writing is a lack of basic skills instruction, not a lack of quantity in writing. If this isn’t enough, a general Google search of “social media negative effects on writing skills” resulted in over 4.6 million links. Additional concern may rest in a lack of reading done by today’s youth, particularly in revered models. Nonetheless, common complaints on the poor state of student writing tend to focus on grammar, spelling, or a lack of sustained, critical thinking skills in the writing process. As seems consistent with media outlets and research, blame is rather equally placed on poor writing instruction and the prevalence of social media.

In my experience, some truth to the research on the current situation of student writing exists. As a classroom teacher, I see that students are integrating social media formats into their attempts at formal writing and definitely in informal assessments with increasing frequency. Without a doubt, students need to write with accuracy, logic, and clarity in a supported environment so that they have, as Driscoll noted, a “solid grasp of effective writing skills” (qtd. in Leal). Despite adolescent objections, the ability to write well is a necessary skill for both college and work; it is even noted as part of the Common Core State Standards as being “College and Career Ready” (Common Core State Standards Initiative). As a reader for the Advanced Placement English Language and Composition exam for the past five years, I have found an increasing percentage of students—often high school juniors and seniors—fail to adequately



produce a coherent on-demand argument. From my observations here and in the classroom, a growing struggle to keep students engaged in a sustained, lengthy written argument has emerged; perhaps this is as Harris suggests, the result of defocusing on literacy with the rapid increase of “so many interesting, often more immediately engrossing things in the world to attend to” (2).

The seeming lack of writing ability of America’s graduates is problematic for a number of reasons. Writing skills are often required and evaluated for admission to post-secondary institutions. College students are required to produce copious amounts of written product for assessment purposes (Harris 3). Resumes and cover letters provide a flash point for employers to make decisions about potential employees (Zumbrunn and Krause 346). Businesses repeatedly call upon their employees to communicate effectively (Harris 3). And, the failure here in producing writers is often placed on English teachers.

The intent of this study is to examine what is going on in Minnesota’s English/Language Arts classrooms in regard to writing. I will define writing and composition in order to delineate what types of writing is being done. Additionally, I will limit the study to Minnesota’s English teachers (focused on non-Advanced Placement, non-International Baccalaureate, and non-National Writing Project classrooms) whose voices have been absent from national studies. I want to know what English teachers are doing or not doing such that these disconcerting results are consistently produced. I suspect that correlations could be found between student writing scores and a lack of any of the following: formal writing instruction, focus on writing instruction, frequency in writing, lengthy writing assignments, teacher training in writing, time for feedback and assessment, and/or ability to teach writing. It is not my intent to place blame or judge my peers, rather to have a clearer picture as to what contributes to the test scores and anecdotal findings reported for Minnesota’s students.

## **Significance of the Research**

The significance of this study lies in the potential it has to discover the place writing has in Minnesota's English/Language Arts curriculum at the high school level. As the State has accepted the Common Core State Standards, writing should find itself consuming at least one-third of the time spent in instruction and student production. Since little research exists on what writing is done in Minnesota's high school classrooms, this study could be used in future research or curriculum development to improve writing instruction.

## **Statement of the Problem**

Writing instruction seems to take a back seat to the study of literature in classrooms across the nation, especially as reflected in the Common Core State Standards in English/Language Arts and in coursework required for pre-service teachers in the state. This is particularly problematic as writing is an essential skill that is used not only in classrooms but also as a tool for measuring student knowledge and success on standardized exams and in various application processes. Minnesota's teachers and educational decision makers should be aware of what is being done in English classrooms around the state. However, no significant research has been done to identify how writing is taught, what writing students do, or what barriers teachers face in the teaching of writing.

## **Research Questions**

With a lack of empirical studies on what is taught in secondary English/Language Arts classrooms across America, this study aims to fill some of that gap. Most studies about the teaching of composition focus on what should be taught rather than "what actually does get taught in such classrooms across the United States" (Patterson and Duer 81). Additionally, of those studies conducted in the composition practices of English/Language Arts teachers, few if

any include students or teachers in Minnesota. Therefore, this study will address the following questions:

1. According to Minnesota's English/Language Arts teachers, what types of writing are high school students doing in their classrooms? (Applebee and Langer, "A Snapshot of Writing Instruction" 14; Kiuvara, Graham, and Hawkin 137; Patterson and Duer 82).
2. According to Minnesota's English/Language Arts teachers, how frequently are students writing for formal and informal purposes? (Applebee and Langer, "A Snapshot of Writing Instruction" 15)
3. According to Minnesota's English/Language Arts teachers, what challenges or barriers do they face in providing writing instruction and assessment? (Kiuvara, Graham, and Hawkin 137; Patterson and Duer 86; Simmons 75).

### **Assumptions**

It is assumed that:

1. the State of Minnesota's Department of Education does not prescribe or mandate one way of teaching writing;
2. secondary schools are implementing the Common Core State Standards as mandated and outlined in statute;
3. high school English teachers are the best subjects from whom to gather the necessary data;
4. the teaching of writing is impacted by factors beyond a teacher's control; and
5. data on the teaching of writing can be collected through quantitative methods.

## **Limitations**

This study is limited as data are collected through an emailed, self-developed survey. Limitations are furthered in that the initial emailed survey is delivered to high school principals rather than English teachers themselves. It is limited to information collected regarding attitudes and practices that are self-reported by high school English teachers. The study is further limited as data collected reflects perceived practice of English teachers. A further limitation is that perceptions were gathered primarily from teachers from rural Minnesota school districts.

## **Chapter 2: REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE**

Current research on the teaching of writing provides insight into the many facets and theories of writing and writing instruction from early writing development through college. An abundance of available research focuses on theories and frameworks of writing, results and analysis of student writing exams and perceptions, and beliefs about the teaching of writing. Relatively little exists that evaluates the skills, attitudes, pedagogies, and perceptions of high school writing teachers and what happens in their classrooms. Hence, this study aims to fill that gap.

### **Writing and Writing Process**

To define writing is a challenging task. Nearly every theory on writing and composition includes communication as part of the definition; however, the question of how to define writing here rests on whether writing is considered a noun or a verb, a product or a process. Indeed, definitions of writing vary as much as areas of expertise in English departments. To provide a definition, it is necessary to examine theorists' perceptions that define writing and composition.

Classical linguists examine language as either first or second order processes with speaking and listening being first order, writing and reading being second order. As a result, linguists believe that writing is secondary to speaking and deem it “ a ‘minor’ form of communication” (Coulmas 3) with a primary objective of recording language. Unlike speaking and listening, writing requires a secondary step to transmit language. As such, writing serves to create a system of keeping language rather than a system of forming it. It aligns with reading as something that transmits a language available to interpretation and requiring formal and systematic instruction (Emig, “Writing as a Mode” 122). In terms of the writing process, factors

such as syntax, exigency, language, and lexical choices guide the writer's composition (Flower and Hayes 365-366).

Various researchers of composition theory have asserted that composition can be placed into three different categories: product/text oriented, process/cognitive oriented, and reader/genre oriented (Yi 55). Historically, the product/text oriented approach to writing focused on final product "with error-free performance at sentence level...and emphasis placed on language form (Yi 56). Thirty years ago, students were given writing assignments with virtually no instructional time on the expectations or introduction (Applebee and Langer, "A Snapshot of Writing Instruction" 14). Essentially, the importance of writing was placed on the final act, submission of writing that has developed a response to a given prompt or assignment. Instruction on the assignment would be limited to understanding the topic of the product with the depth and articulation expected by the instructor. This methodology, aligning more with linguistic models, dominated writing and writing instruction until the emergence of the cognitive model of writing instruction.

Composition theorists who follow the cognitive model of writing have multifaceted perspectives on the definition of writing. With many voices in this theoretical framework, the definitions of writing have developed as a series of functions within the act of writing. Early cognitive theorists have defined writing as a deeply contextual act (Graham and Perin 445; Read and Landon-Hays 7) that is best defined operationally (Emig "Writing as a Mode" 123). Led by Emig's early studies, writing process has moved beyond a "lockstep, non-recursive, left-to-right sequence" (Emig "On Teaching Composition" 131) of activities in the planning, writing, and revising motion of composition. The act of writing takes place in a loop rather than a line with the writer making strategic decisions based on his skills, motivation, purpose, and mode of

writing. As such, in an operational sense, writing in the cognitive model is a means to clarify thinking, promote intellectual growth, and enhance understanding and retention (Daisy 157). It serves to “gain insight into a student’s thinking, or as a way for students to demonstrate higher order thinking skills (Read and Landon-Hays 6). As a cognitive process, writers scaffold their learning in order to produce writing that reflects and makes sense of what has been learned. Along that vein, writing is also “a representation of the world made visible, embodying both process and product” (Emig “Writing as a Mode” 124). Situated within material that is taught, ideas that are constructed, and physical compositions that are produced, writing reveals the interior of the writer. Providing further definition of writing, the National Council of Teachers of English (NCTE) asserts that writing is a “powerful instrument of thought” accomplished through a recursive process for a range of purposes and audiences (“Professional Knowledge”). Connecting with the Sanskrit definition of writing—to wound, tear, or cut—where the act and product were the result of an implement on stone or bark, writing is what “leaves these marks” (Carter 102), in both process and product. It is this concept—writing as process and product—that philosophically drives writing instruction in high schools and colleges.

Since the 1970s, an instructional shift in writing to the process/cognitive-oriented model of writing has occurred. Beginning with a study of twelfth grade students’ writing habits, Emig built a legacy of writing process theory. Using a case-study approach as a means to establish her theory, Emig used her observations of high school students to determine common practices writers share: context, stimuli, prewriting and planning, starting, composing aloud, stopping, contemplation, reformation, and teacher influence (*The Composing Processes* 34-35). In each step, Emig asserted a different purpose in the process of writing. The impetus for writing would begin with the context in which the writing is being done. From that the student would

determine if the composition was reflexive (the contemplation in writing that creates personal meaning) or extensive (the action in writing that examines an individual's role in his environment). Rather than the traditionally accepted notion of writing of linguists, Emig expanded the expressive use of language to include the writer's relationship to purpose (37). Prior to actually putting ideas to paper, writers Emig studied engaged in prewriting and planning, elements of the process determined by purpose. Where writing actually began, in the starting stage, was when the writer first placed an element on paper (40). The remaining stages undertaken prior to final product—composing aloud, reformulation, stopping—were shown to happen throughout the writing stage, not separate from it. These elements provided opportunities for the writer to reflect, redevelop, and revise the piece of writing both alone and with others in order to work toward final product. Emig noted that upon completion of a work, the final stopping, the writer then contemplates the work by both reflecting on his own attitudes and by wondering about the reader's response to the piece. The final step, which rests outside the writer's control, concerned the assessment of the writing by others leading into reflective practice of the assessor and the individual who assigned the writing. While all of these stages have distinct purposes, Emig repeatedly highlighted the recursive nature of the process, that only the final stages lack the generative and recursive purposes of the process.

Building from Emig's ideology, Flower and Hayes brought writing into cognitive theory. They established that the cognitive process theory consists of four key points:

1. The writing process is a thinking process such that writers create and organize during the act of composing
2. The writing process has a hierarchical organizational system such that all elements are embedded in the others



3. Composing is a thinking and goal-directed process
4. Writers invent their own goals through sense of purpose, changing goals along the way, or creating new goals based on what has been learned through the writing (366).

With these points in mind, Flower and Hayes created a model that was reduced from Emig's ten practices to three units: "the task environment, the writer's long-term memory, and the writing process" (369) with a distinct focus on the writing process. The writer uses the context of the writing task to draw upon a knowledge base in order to engage in the basic processes of planning, translating, and reviewing. According to Flower and Hayes, these stages—planning, translating, and reviewing—are broken down into sub-processes available to writers according to their needs. Additionally, the stages highlight that the "process of writing is not a sequence of stages but a set of optional actions" (375) that can be taken out as tools in a toolbox. Notably, the cognitive theory of writing accounts for the purposefulness of writing, placing emphasis on the "complex and imaginative acts" (386) of the writer.

These shifts in writing process paradigms were identified by Maxine Hairston as necessary to improve the climate of composition teaching. The paradigm shifts of note were brought on by changing demographics in the college system that made the methods used in the early 1970s anomalous (Hairston 81). Similarly, such paradigm shifts are necessary with 21<sup>st</sup> Century classrooms where students are writing in increasingly social contexts for purposes more directed to form and function. More recent research is highlighting writing as a highly textured social act (Hull and Bartholomae "Teaching Writing" 45).

Moving beyond process models of writing instruction, advanced writing instruction and composition strategies for second language learners are embracing the reader/genre-oriented

method, also referred to as post-process writing. In this, audience and social context are central to the approach; additionally, the importance of rhetorical knowledge is embedded in what would be deemed a successful text (Yi 60). To write with genre methodology, writers must have an understanding of the exigency that brings them to the writing and an awareness of the contextual framework in which the writing is situated. As opposed to writing process where students work through stages of composition, the genre method calls for writers to learn rhetorical actions that are manipulated and adapted for a writing's purpose and social context (Hyland 22).

The genre method is grounded in Bakhtinian theory that writing is dialogic, occurring in the exchange between speakers and in the “intentional negotiation of meaning and interpretation between author and reader” (Bizzell and Herzberg 1206). It also combines the ideologies of rhetorician Lloyd Bitzer, who conjectured that speech is a response to a rhetorical situation in which a simultaneous interaction between entities is involved in the ideation of said speech. As such, writers must recognize their role as participants in the larger conversation of composition, paying particular attention to the social aspects of writing. More currently, Carolyn Miller has expanded on the features of Bitzer's work, establishing that genre theory features five primary elements that act in concert: determination of the rhetorical situation, taking of action, recognition that actions can be repeated based on replication of situations, regularizing discourse, and taking action based on situations.

Pedagogically, this theory is not new in high school settings. For students and teachers in Advanced Placement courses, the genre approach is implicit in classroom assignments. Exigency and understanding of the rhetorical situation are embedded in the expectations established by the College Board. For students in second language classrooms, the social contexts of language are imperative to language acquisition. However, in a general education setting, the genre ideology

may take a back seat to process writing around specific tasks and assignments as standards and textbooks firmly rely on process methodology.

### **Theory and Practice in Writing Instruction**

Attempting to develop an understanding of best practice in writing or what is necessary for high school students to master in writing, English teachers may resort to research for direction. The face of current research on writing instruction falls into a few categories: theories and belief statements on writing processes and instruction, comparisons of writing expectations of high school and college English teachers, review of writing on-demand exams and available perceptions of what writing is done in high school, and case studies or observational notes on English teacher practices. Although numerous texts have been published on effective writing instruction in high school classrooms, national consortiums and college professors, rather than the high school teachers whose perceptions are the purpose of this study, largely do this research and make recommendations on the teaching of writing.

The guiding forces in current writing instruction in the English/Language Arts classrooms are geared toward the process model as alluded to in state statute and national organization belief statements. The National Council of Teachers of English advocates that students write, “through a process in which the writer imagines an audience, sets goals, develops ideas, produces notes, drafts, and a revised text, and edits to meet the audience’s expectations” (NCTE). Further belief statements available through NCTE note that writing is a recursive process in which students should be guided through all stages, not necessarily in a linear manner. Applebee and Langer found that process-oriented writing instruction is the primary mode in a majority of English classrooms; however, their observations showed that less than 16 percent of class time was devoted to any form of writing instruction (“A Snapshot of Writing Instruction” 21). Drawing

from both Emig and Flower and Hayes, the process involves several elements including cycles of planning, translating, writing, and reviewing; student interaction and creation in a supportive environment; self-reflection and evaluation; personalized individual assistance; and occasional systematic instruction (Graham and Perin 449). It also involves the scaffolding of instruction to carry out the process. Similar to the belief statements established by NCTE, the Common Core State Standards, adopted nationwide by state governments, advocate for students to engage in writing processes to complete specific tasks that determine college and career readiness (Common Core State Standards Initiative). Not articulated as definitively as NCTE, the national consortium of governors and state officers highlighted process as a necessary component in writing instruction and student composition.

Many studies rely on the expectations of college instructors in freshman composition courses to assess the success of high school English teachers in writing instruction and high school graduates in writing ability. These studies often use anecdotal evidence in a deficit model to identify what is not happening in high school writing classrooms. (This could possibly be tied into the ACT and Advanced Placement examination discussion noted later.) Even with this reliance, disagreement among researchers that high school teachers have an understanding of what is expected of college-bound high school graduates exists. Addison and McGee found that college and high school faculty are “generally aligned with one another when it comes to prewriting, clear expectations, and good instructor practices” (157). Commonality is found in that “Writing quality is based on readers’ judgment of the overall merit of a composition, taking into account factors such as ideation, organization, vocabulary, sentence structure, and tone” (Graham and Perin 447). Reviewing surveys given to both high school teachers and college professors, Patterson and Duer concur with these notions identifying the greatest difference in

focus on grammar. In their study, high school teachers instruct on grammar but place less importance on mastery than college professors (82). Despite general similarities in expectations and areas of value, the most significant differences between instructors pedagogically were that college instructors used fewer informal assessments and lacked peer review as compared to their high school colleagues (Addison and McGee 157).

Researchers call for high school writing instructors to engage their students in myriad writing processes; however, the specificity of how these processes are to be implemented is missing from their work; when implementation options are shared, they occasionally fail to translate effectively into practice. As a result, the lack of connection between the two furthers the divide between theory and practice. Light could be shed on the differences in vision of writing instruction: the job responsibilities of high school and college English teachers. The enormous difference in job roles and responsibilities between college instructors and researchers and their high school counterparts creates some of the problem in the practicality and applicability of writing studies. Jones notes that the focus of high school and college instructors is vastly different, and that writing purpose supports that. High school teachers have more responsibility to student daily development while college instructors have greater responsibility to individual scholarship. Tibbetts and Tibbetts found that teachers tend to be on the firing line of instructional practice while college professors “seldom hear the guns” (479). In their research, Tibbetts and Tibbetts uncovered a variety of situations where theories and practices developed by college professors failed miserably upon implementation in high school classrooms.

Another significant difference that widens the gap between college and high school instructors is the emphasis placed on various activities. According to the ACT National Curriculum Survey, high school students are not given enough longer writing to prepare for

demands of college writing as noted by college professors' responses (4). The survey also uncovered attitudes that high school teachers value expressive writing a bit more, but give similar importance to persuasive, explanatory, and logical arguments, even if students rarely write those types of assignments (7). One significant difference noted is that high school teachers assigned more research projects that did not require significant writing, but college assigned longer papers (8-9). To remedy some of the distance in theory and practice, perhaps college and high school faculty should take suggestions from Kati Haycock, director of the Education Trust, that higher education reach out to high schools through teacher/professor mentorship programs and as a means to bridge the skills (and expectations) gap that is experienced by first-year composition instructors (38).

Beyond formal belief statements, research on the differences in high school and college expectations, and applied studies done through higher education on the abilities of high school writers and the practices in which they engaged, the current condition of writing is, to a limited extent, reflected through on-demand writing assessments and perceptions of classroom practices. Use of on-demand assessments to inform practice and policy is common; "Writing has historically and inextricably been linked to testing" (Yancey 2). In the public eye, it seems that writing is reduced to reported performance on college entrance and accountability exams. On a comparative national level, high school writing skill is best understood and measured by on-demand exams such as the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) writing assessment, the ACT writing exam, Advanced Placement exams and International Baccalaureate exams (in a variety of areas). Of these, only the NAEP provides generalizable data as students sampled are intended to be representative of the nation's students. Unlike other widely implemented studies, according to Applebee and Langer, the NAEP results identify "what

teachers mean by [writing process although] how it is implemented in their classrooms remains unclear” (“What is Happening” 26).

The National Assessment of Educational Progress is designed to measure the writing abilities of students in grades 4, 8, and 12 across the nation (National Assessment Governing Board v). The framework for assessment is built upon research in composition, from experts in a variety of interested fields from education and business, and from members of key organizations. This assessment framework also reflects the standards outlined in the Common Core State Standards. From 1998 to the present, the NAEP framework has provided “the only nationally representative data on writing achievement” measuring what students “*know and are able to do* in relation to the instruction they have received” (2). The writing prompts on the NAEP are designed so that students engage in a social act, yet these exist as inauthentic tasks of requiring on-demand responses to fictitious scenarios requiring persuasion, explanation, or conveying of an experience. Upon completion, students are then assessed holistically in three areas: idea development, organization, and language and conventions (35).

Sadly, results from the 2011 NAEP were discouraging. Of the 28,100 twelfth-graders who wrote the exams, only 24 percent were found to be proficient with an additional three percent reported as advanced. Students scoring “at [the proficient] level have clearly demonstrated the ability to accomplish the communicative purpose of their writing” (National Center for Educational Statistics 1). Based on the NAEP criteria, a student deemed proficient was able to develop “explanations with well-chosen details in parts of the response and [show] an overall control of the progression of ideas and sentence structure” (NCES 41). Those who achieved a basic status, which accounted for 52 percent of participants, “developed explanations using some details that [did] not enhance the clarity or progression of ideas” (41) and had

simplistic or loose sentence structures. Given simply as a nationally representative sample, the NAEP scores may reflect Minnesota's students; however, the results do not include any reference to participant schools beyond demographic information.

In addition to determining the competency of students in their writing ability, the NAEP also collected perception data to inform some of the findings. Participants who reported writing four or more pages a week for English/Language Arts homework (accounting for 18 percent of participants) scored higher than students who did not write that extensively (National Center for Educational Statistics 33). Those students who reported writing no writing in English classrooms (12 percent) averaged 139 scale points, and those who wrote up to one page per week (26 percent) averaged 145 scale points with 150 being average. It was not until students reported writing more than a page that the average score on the NAEP exceeded average at 155 scale points. Computer use for daily work was also positively correlated to success on the NAEP. Among twelfth-graders who scored in the 75<sup>th</sup> percentile with scale scores on the essays above 175 points, 77 percent reported always using a computer to edit their work as compared to 33 percent of the low performing students (38). This was confirmed on the exam itself where students' self-editing was monitored. High performing students used the backspace key much more frequently than their low performing counterparts. This data is certainly informative for practice and implementation in Minnesota's classrooms.

Because the NAEP does not delineate scores by state, it is difficult to comment on the writing abilities and experiences specifically of students in Minnesota. However, using other measures, such as the ACT, some observations can be made, especially since the ACT exam has been aligned to the Common Core State Standards. Accounting for 78% of Minnesota's graduates in 2015, 46,862 students took the ACT exam. In the years they were able to take the



exam (sophomore through senior year), Minnesota's students scored above the national average on all elements of the multiple-choice sections of English and reading skills ("Minnesota Profile Report"). On the optional essay section of the examination, half of those original examinees performed above the national scores, averaging 7.1 on the writing rubric as compared to the national average of 6.9. While this may seem to be exemplary, the rubric rises to a high score of 12. A rubric score of 7 to 8 identifies that a student has adequate skills in the five areas of assessment: the ability to express judgments, to focus on a topic, to develop ideas, to organize ideas, and to use language.

In addition to judgments made from the ACT exam, some conclusions may be drawn on the state of writing in Minnesota from Advanced Placement and International Baccalaureate examinations. In 2015, 21 schools in Minnesota offered the International Baccalaureate diploma, with only two of those schools representing the outstate regions. Specific details on student results with these internationally recognized diplomas and exams are not readily available; therefore, little can be gleaned from reports available. However, the Advanced Placement exams offer some interesting insights into writing abilities of Minnesota's high school students. Because the College Board advocates for open access to Advanced Placement courses for all students willing to accept the rigor of the courses and that published documents show alignment between the goals of Advanced Placement English courses and the Common Core State Standards, correlations can be made in how Minnesota's students compare to national averages. According to the Minnesota Office of Higher Education, in the 2013-2014 school year, 236 of 432 school districts offered Advanced Placement courses ("Advanced Placement"). In 2015, the College Board reported that 111 schools offered Advanced Placement English Language and Composition and 147 schools offered the English Literature and Composition

course (“Minnesota Profile Report”). Examinations for these courses, like the ACT plus writing, call for students to complete multiple choice questions and compose free response essays (three in these exams as compared to one for the ACT); yet, students are expected to write for a variety of purposes on a variety of subjects employing a variety of writing skills. These on-demand exams again show Minnesota’s students as performing above the national averages. Using a five-point scale to determine whether a student is qualified to receive college credit based on the exam scores (College Board “AP Exam Scores”), Minnesota’s students average 3.08 on the Language and Composition exam as compared to the national average of 2.79. Similar results can be found on the Literature and Composition exam where Minnesota’s students average 3.02 as compared to the 2.78 national average. On these exams, a score of three is considered qualified and equivalent to a course grade of “B-, C+ or C” (College Board “AP Exam Scores”).

Overwhelmingly, national measures of student writing as applied to Minnesota’s students show that these students, largely college-bound, are performing better than their national counterparts. Minnesota’s examinees tend to meet the standards established by national consortiums and demonstrate ability to perform on standardized on-demand writing exams. Although the previously noted test results seem positive, the fact that a large number of students are underperforming is problematic. No public data is available as to how Minnesota’s students performed specific to the ACT writing exam beyond school and state average scores. The College Board does provide some detail as to the number of students who miss the mark on the reported scores on the AP (Advanced Placement) exams. Of the 6,818 students who took the Language and Composition exam in 2015, 30.5 percent of Minnesota’s students were deemed unqualified for college credit as compared to 44.6 percent of the nation’s examinees. Of the Literature and Composition students who took the exam, 32.9 percent of Minnesota’s students

were unqualified as compared to 44.1 percent of the nation's participants ("Minnesota Profile Report"). What this means for college composition instructors is that a large number of students who would have enrolled in introductory composition courses (and likely would have performed well) would probably bypass these courses, and those students who are enrolled in introductory college composition courses (on whose work observations are reported as research) have either not taken AP coursework or have failed to perform adequately in on-demand exams.

Unfortunately, these on-demand exams also fail to provide a sufficient picture of what students are capable of in authentic situations, and the reported results of these exams shape the attitudes of the public on the state of writing in high school classrooms.

So, as media outlets present student test scores on writing assessments, it is no wonder why fully grasping what is happening in high school English classes is so confusing. Literacy teaching and measures have been largely focused on reading skills rather than writing. Even the ACT and AP exams place heavy emphasis on the ability to read as evidenced by the significant amount of reading expected on both multiple choice and composition portions. In a practical and day-to-day sense, writing has taken the back burner to reading. With limited research that identifies the perceptions and practices of English/Language Arts teachers, understanding what influences the choices teachers make about curriculum and pedagogy is difficult. Landon-Hays' interviews of English teachers find that "teachers have not had good models in writing instruction" (9) and have relied on what they thought their high school teachers expected rather than receiving "side-by-side learning, modeling, or scaffolding" (9). In addition, the writing on which public measures are focused tend to use on-demand, inauthentic writing experiences as a means to report on the poor condition of writing instruction in America's schools (Read and

Landon-Hays 6). Due to the importance placed on these measures, teaching of writing has often turned toward instruction geared toward passing the writing tests (Murphy and Yancey 448).

With an unclear direction or definition on best practice in writing instruction and the fracture between researcher and practitioner, it is no wonder that student success in writing is seemingly abysmal.

### **Direction for the Teaching of Writing**

Perhaps the best course of action in making sense of the seemingly poor state of student writing is to examine where writing instruction and expectations begin: teacher prep programs, accepted state standards, and expectations from external sources (testing organizations, college entrance committees, and the world of work). No doubt English teachers, in practice or pre-service, seem to lack direction on what writing instruction is or should be. As a result, many students flounder on writing tasks given to them in situations outside of their high school classrooms. Such an issue is not, however, exclusively the fault of teachers and students. Many factors contribute to this confusion, including teacher preparation programs, cumbersome state requirements, and imposed standards. When these factors intersect in the classroom, the difficulty is magnified as expectations exceed time, interest, and ability. To begin the work of unraveling the issue, let us begin with preparation programs and state expectations for teacher licensure in English/Communication Arts.

English departments are often divided into specialties of creative writing, linguistics, literature, rhetoric and composition, teaching, and teaching English as a second language; likewise, students who emerge from these departments are similarly divided, especially when they become teachers of English in the secondary school. Most high school teachers do not have experience as graduate assistants who have been required to teach beginning composition

classes, nor have they had opportunities to work in college writing centers. As a result, their experience in teaching writing is limited to their own high school and undergraduate education and experience. As a matter of fact, many English teachers never took a beginning composition course in college as their personal skills or test scores exempted them from those courses. At St. Cloud State University, students graduating with a bachelor's degree in Communication Arts and Literature (the program designed to prepare English graduates for the classroom) are only required to take eight credits specifically designed for writing and nine credits on theory, pedagogy, and practice in the teaching of English ("University Catalog: English"). Of the former, students work to improve their own writing. Of the latter, descriptions focus on the theoretical and pedagogical constructs of teaching in the field; little is mentioned of strategy or methodology in writing instruction. Without access to specific syllabi, it can be assumed that strategies and methodologies mimic the emphasis of the degree—literature and oral communication. Another pathway to the teaching of English offered at St. Cloud State University is a degree in Communication Studies which directly aligns with the English department curriculum; both departments provide identical descriptions of course requirements for licensure on their respective webpages, with the possibility for students to have either a Communications or English focus. Paralleling the public university experience, at Gustavus Adolphus College, students majoring in Communication Studies/Literature education are required to take two courses focused on writing; one course is noted as engaging in discussion of writing theory while the other is exclusively on writing theory and practice ("English Academic Catalog"). At this college, student coursework is aligned and outlined according to licensure expectations established by the state of Minnesota. Overall, English departments are producing students whose undergraduate coursework is heavily focused on literature (Jones 8; Read and

Landon-Hays 12; Tulley 41). When writing methodology is the focus, the challenge to teaching about writing, theory and practice are not explicitly linked (Tulley 45). Perhaps the reason for such limited writing coursework and background is not due to the beliefs of college and university faculty but rather the result of complex, yet minimal expectations noted in statute.

Minnesota Statute 8710.4250 outlines the requirements necessary to receive a teaching license in communication arts and literature. The standards, originally published in 2009 and updated in 2015, require that candidates for licensure demonstrate knowledge and competency in 32 different areas. Of these, few vaguely describe necessary skills: the ability to “understand and apply”

- the phonological, grammatical, and semantic functions of language;
- communication which is clear, fluent, strategic, critical, and creative;
- strategies that allow appropriate engagement in communication tasks for a variety of purposes and audiences;
- the integration of reading, writing, speaking, listening, and viewing;
- research methods encompassing content;
- the social, intellectual, and political importance and impact of communication;
- the meanings of messages, content and relational;
- communication and its value in exploring and expressing ideas; and
- communication arts and literature activities such as forensics, debate, journalism, literary journals, and related activities (Revisor of Statutes).

Statute also dictates that teachers of communication arts must demonstrate “knowledge, skills, and ability to teach writing: (a) various stages of the writing process, including prewriting, writing, conferencing, revising, and publishing used in teaching writing; (b) diverse strategies for

assessing and responding to student writing; (c) the functions of language and how they influence effective written communication; and (d) conventions for presenting, arranging, and organizing information in particular genres or media” (Revisor of Statutes). Although noted with sub-categories, what teaching candidates are required to prove is that their ability to teach writing is just one of eight key competencies; this with fewer substrands than any other in the category. It should be clear, therefore, that the teaching of writing takes a backseat to the other skills required of both students and teachers in an English classroom.

On a similar note, the Common Core of State Standards appear to confuse the teaching of writing. The Common Core separates the standards into four primary areas: reading, writing, speaking and listening, and language. Within the four areas, reading is separated into two parts—literature and informational texts—each with four main skill areas. Likewise, writing has four substrands delineated into text types and purposes, production and distribution of writing, research to build and present knowledge, and range of writing. Under each substrand, specific tasks are outlined such that students develop competency in a variety of skills. In the writing substrands, except for text types and purposes, competencies are demonstrated through engaging in other processes, rather than creating a product as in the former expectation. Using the standards established for students in grades 11 and 12 as a means for discussion, the complexity of the Common Core could be reviewed easily. In this age group, as students engage in the production and distribution of writing, they are to “produce clear and coherent writing” (45), engage in a writing process (note that there is no specific process given), and use technology. Competency in research, the next substrand, is a cumbersome set of tasks separated into conducting research in order to answer a question or solve a problem, engaging in the gathering, assessment, and integration of source material, and drawing evidence from literary and

informational texts to support ideas. If that was not clear enough, the final substrand calls for students to write for a variety of purposes routinely within various time frames. Although these tasks may not be confusing for an English teacher, they are overwhelming when taken in concert with all of the other standards outlined in the document. With 42 other areas to master in grades 11-12, it seems that each of these is a discreet task to cover over the course of two years.

Granted the authors of the document stress that these standards may be done together with other standards in a unit, that is not entirely clear throughout the text.

The Common Core of State Standards Initiative acknowledges that its expectations for modes of writing were largely influenced by the NAEP writing standards of 2011. As a result, the standards call for students to demonstrate skills in three types of writing: arguments, informative/explanatory texts, and narratives. As outlined in each of the substrands, readiness expectations are quite prescriptive, with each skill repeated fairly closely, regardless of the type of writing that is to be done. For example, in writing an argument, students are to “Develop claim(s) and counterclaims fairly and thoroughly, supplying the most relevant evidence for each while pointing out the strengths and limitations of both in a manner that anticipates the audience’s knowledge level, concerns, values, and possible biases” (Common Core State Standards Initiative 45). Similarly, in writing an informative text, students are to “Develop the topic thoroughly by selecting the most significant and relevant facts, extended definitions, concrete details, quotations, or other information and examples appropriate to the audience’s knowledge of the topic” (45). Additionally, students are expected to “use” a variety of techniques and employ prescribed elements within each piece. While this may not seem troubling, the freedom of the writer is excluded in what decisions to make in the process. The independence outlined in the “portrait of students who meet the standards” (Common Core State



Standards Initiative “Introduction”) is not that of students developing as individual writers; it is students independently demonstrating each of the standards, substrands, and activities. Beyond that, an additional problem with the standards rests on the instructional side. The instructor is responsible for determining what is meant by vague terminology in each of the strands, “thoroughly” and “relevant” as examples, and to parse out the complex elements that are all drawn into one student task.

To better understand the situation created by the Common Core, it is important to review the history of the document. Originally developed in 2009 in a collaborative effort of the National Governors Association Center for Best Practices and the Council of Chief State School Officers, the Common Core aimed to outline what students would be expected to know and do before high school graduation. The goal of the Common Core was to establish standards that would be nationally accepted as those which would make American students college and career ready. According to the Standards Setting Criteria, “... The standards must be reasonable in scope in defining the knowledge and skills students should have to be ready to succeed in entry-level, credit-bearing, academic college courses and in workforce training programs.” As this may be true, NCTE published a statement that even as these expansions have enlarged the experience of writing outside school, implementation of the first USA nation-wide standards in literacy—the Common Core State Standards—has, in some places, contributed to narrowing students’ experience of writing inside school (“Professional Knowledge”).

Once developed and subject to several reviews, the standards were then released to state governments in 2010 for ratification and adoption. With this process, the Common Core essentially became a political statement as well as a law that placed pressure on English teachers to fulfill in their classrooms. Although the Common Core leaves implementation and

understanding of outcomes to the teachers, it was hoped by some that the Common Core would provide opportunities for more writing, especially across the curriculum (Applebee and Langer “A Snapshot of Writing Instruction” 26).

Certainly, the lack of attention given to writing in teaching preparation and the lack of specificity in state standards should be easily correlated to reported test scores, but that is an inaccurate and inauthentic measure of what is happening in high schools across the country.

### **Writing in the English Classroom**

Standards outline that a writing process is to be used in secondary English/Language Arts classrooms in order to prepare students for college and career, and certainly, writing process is widely researched and implemented in high schools across the state and country. Research has shown that elements of the writing process have been implemented with varying levels of success. From the beginning of the process, effective writing instruction assists students in managing the writing process by setting aside time for elements in the process to be “separated into parts and to make sure that writers focus their energies on one part at a time” (Hull and Bartholomae 48). Two widely cited comprehensive studies examined the nature of writing and writing instruction in the United States. Using a meta-analysis of published studies on writing in elementary, middle, and high schools, the researchers examined process-writing strategies in order to determine what would be most effective in classroom practice. First, George Hillock’s calculated the effect sizes of writing interventions in studies done with students in grades three through college. His findings later led to publication of several writing texts. More recently, Graham and Perin (2007) conducted a meta-analysis to determine “what instructional practices improve the quality of adolescent students’ writing” (447). Their studies fell overwhelmingly into cognitive/process theory with some sociocultural views included that focus on writing

quality. What makes understanding these studies difficult is that for many English/Language Arts teachers, effect sizes are challenging to understand and determining what practices would be most effective is difficult. Nonetheless, a few findings support elements of the writing process as having particular significance in the composition process. In the generalized steps, it seems that prewriting makes the greatest difference in creation of a quality product (Graham and Perin 463). Applebee and Langer agree; their study found that prewriting in class generating and organizing ideas (“A Snapshot” 20) is beneficial to students articulating a purpose and direction for their writing. To make prewriting more successful, students must be given compelling reasons to write (Hull and Bartholomae 51), which should then come through their prewriting and later drafting. Additional benefit was found in providing models for writing (Applebee and Langer 21; Graham and Perin 464; Hairston 88) so that students have an understanding of expectations and exemplars. Interestingly, feedback was found to have mixed results in the process. When feedback is given throughout the students’ writing process, from prewriting through editing, the effect is largely positive, but after a final draft is submitted, the impact on feedback is negligible unless further work is done with that feedback (Graham and Perin 464; Zumbrunn and Krause 350).

Process writing is not completely embraced by researchers and theorists. Bartholomae sees prewriting a waste of time, independent of language and the contexts that construct ideas and language (“Writing Assignments 42). He believes that students would be better served by instructors who require students to demand something of the reader, that requires repeated and on-going effort, where the student has to “spend time with a subject” (“Writing Assignments” 42). Writing process is further questioned when it is taught in a proscriptive, piecemeal approach (Wheeler and Carrales 25) rather than having a college emphasis on multiple drafts and

self-discovery of best personal process. Despite negative critiques, writing process does work for many students as they develop their own means of communication and composition.

Studies, primarily focused on cognitive theory, of the writing done in America's high schools has not been limited to writing process; much research has reflected the kinds of writing students have and have not done. If writing is limited to that which is done for classroom assessment, students in today's high schools are not writing much. In their four-year national study, Applebee and Langer found that only 19 percent of writing done for secondary classes was of one paragraph or more ("What is Happening" 21). This is confirmed by Kiuahara, Graham, and Hawken, who found that the most common types of writing done in high school writing classrooms are short answer responses to homework, reading responses, worksheets, and summaries of readings (140). The five-paragraph essay is typically completed once per quarter or slightly more often (140). Addison and McGee found that writing products generally become more lengthy and complex as students grow older: freshmen and sophomores are doing in-class writing, journals, reflective writing, and summaries; juniors and seniors are writing research papers, critiques, position papers, and analysis essays (164). Whether these types of writing are informed by instructive practices is unclear. Rarely, if ever, are students asked if instruction was given, only what types of writing was typically assigned.

Genre theorists are much more critical of writing done in high school classrooms. Bartholomae summed up his thoughts on basic writing in high school English classrooms as "dominated by the topic sentence, the controlling idea, gathering ideas that fit while excluding, outlawing those that don't" ("The Tidy House" 12). In discussion of his own research, he found that the narratives of writing classrooms are largely devoid of social contexts ("The Tidy House" 17) and are in desperate need of "preparing students to negotiate the full range of expectations in

the university” (“The Tidy House” 20). Hull and Bartholomae argue that in order for teachers and students to truly see what students have learned, writing must be the center as students will “spend their time practicing and observing the ways written language creates and records acts of understanding” (52) rather than following a rote process. For genre theorists, students are best prepared when high school writing teachers emphasize audience and rhetorical goals (Wheeler and Carrales 24). While these theorists question, study, and comment on the state of writing and what should be done, little tells what writing is actually done and what is impacting writing English/Language Arts classrooms.

Much research has suggested that students are writing less in their English/Language Arts classrooms now than in years past. External forces such as high-stakes testing and an increased emphasis on literature and reading may be leading to a reduced number and variety of writing assignments and a lack of complexity in student material (Applebee and Langer, “A Snapshot of Writing Instruction” 17, 24; Simmons 75). Often credited to an increasingly political climate heavily focused on product, writing for a variety of purposes, functions, and modes has become limited (Scherff and Piazza 272). In fact, writing has shifted to practice for timed, on-demand writing tasks rather than ways to “demonstrate content-knowledge or disciplinary thinking” (Applebee and Langer, “A Snapshot of Writing Instruction” 18), and as a result, much of that writing is formulaic (25). The five-paragraph essay has become dominant and “synonymous with learning to write” (Scherff and Piazza 273) and stands as both a supported and decried format in professional literature (Simmons 75). It seems that the importance of high-stakes exams has shaped curriculum as extra importance has been placed on passage of exams rather than learning to write (Applebee and Langer, “A Snapshot of Writing Instruction” 17).

It is important to note that writing is not, and should not, be limited to the formal teaching in classroom settings. In modern terms, how teenagers, and digital practitioners for that matter, define writing may surprise theorists and traditionalists. According to the Pew Internet study, *Writing, Teens, and Technology*, teenagers define writing in means that are not “nearly as inclusive as what we might define as writing” (qtd. in Addison and McGee 167). Teenagers do not recognize their digital writing as composition. As a matter of fact, they may be writing more than researchers recognize as many of the digital forms are not included in writing studies. Still, these writings are not usually strategically instructed within English classrooms. To align with this and bring relevance to the English/Language Arts classroom, writing should and is beginning to extend beyond formal opportunities and to public audiences, various genres, and involve increasing use of technology (Zumbrunn and Krause 350) so that students develop their own efficacy in a 21<sup>st</sup> Century classroom.

Limited critical discussion exists on a primary factor that impacts writing instruction—the teacher. Beyond standards, research, and available tools, the teacher’s skills and attitudes shape curriculum, instruction, and student beliefs on writing. Teachers who report having a sense of efficacy for teaching of writing spend more time teaching writing (Zumbrunn and Krause 348). On the contrary, “Teachers who do not like to write ask their students to write less than teachers with positive attitudes toward writing” (Daisy 158). Positive role models are critical to making writing work within the classroom. Zumbrunn and Krause, who researched teacher practices and attitudes toward writing, presented five key principles to effective writing instruction: instructors who realize the impact of their writing beliefs, experiences, and practices; encouragement of student motivation and engagement; clear and deliberate but flexible planning; daily practice; and scaffolded collaboration (347). Of these, teacher beliefs have been

found to have a particularly strong impact on student success and the emphasis that is placed on writing within the classroom.

### **Obstacles in the Teaching of Writing**

Without a doubt, current research in writing instruction is largely theoretical, and the cognitive processes of writing dominate scholarly research in writing in general high school English classrooms. However, some studies have intimated the barriers that obstruct teachers from re-visioning writing instruction as a primary goal of classroom instruction; the most recent of these can be found as dissertation topics. Still, research is showing that not much has changed in the teaching of writing since the 1980s. In 1980, Tibbetts and Tibbetts set out to find what writing instruction looked like in the United States. What they found is, despite work from NCTE to re-vision writing instruction, that pedagogy had not changed. They attributed this to a few factors: lack of or poor quality writing instruction or curriculum, poor preparation in college, lack of administrative guidance, and heavy teaching loads (480). These are not the only factors that create obstacles for high school teachers in the teaching of writing; included in this list are attitudes of writing teachers on writing, student behavior during writing time and instruction, lack of alignment of standards to assessments, and the emphasis placed on literature in pre-service programs, standards, and current practice.

Several researchers have commented on the typical workloads of teachers that make providing authentic feedback to student writing unreasonable. In addition to time spent inside the classroom and during contractual time, teachers in Read and Landon-Hays' study averaged "five to ten hours per week" (10) grading papers. Tibbetts and Tibbetts concur; the nature of an English teacher's work can "[drag] on them like an anchor" (480). A common complaint shared with Applebee and Langer was that the more students practice writing, the more difficult it is to

find time to provide meaningful feedback (“A Snapshot of Writing Instruction” 16). This obstruction to effectiveness is compounded by class size. The National Council of Teachers of English believes that writing classrooms should be limited to 20 students in order to encourage “frequent writing assignments and frequent individual attention” (NCTE “Teaching Composition”). However, fiscal concerns have driven up class sizes and teaching loads (Addison and McGee 148), which then create disparity in what students and teachers see as successful writing, especially when many English/Language Arts instructors have loads greater than 150 students (Simmons 75).

Teaching load is not the only issue at hand. Students are not provided with writing instruction time. Applebee and Langer found that only 7.7 percent of class time is spent on writing instruction across the curriculum (“A Snapshot of Writing Instruction” 16); considering that the researchers studied schools that had significant emphasis on writing instruction, that percentage is problematically low. Read and Landon-Hayes also found that time for writing quality instruction was lower than ideal with limited time for individualization, feedback and modeling as primary concerns (10). This lack of instructional time was echoed in research done by White and Hall; their research showed that 70 percent of respondents believed the greatest barrier to teaching writing was a lack of instructional time (4).

More difficulties rest on various models and categories of writing instruction discussed in research and textbooks that lack implementation strategies, timelines, and specific pedagogical tactics. While most English/Language Arts teachers have significant personal background in writing, their knowledge of writing methodology for classroom settings is limited. Teacher preparation programs tend to focus on writing based on literature (Crank 51; Read and Landon-Hays 12) rather than writing pedagogy. Theory rather than practice tends to be the focus (Read



and Landon-Hays 9; Reid 204), and direct training in writing instruction and assessment is minimal in teacher preparation programs (Crank 56; Read and Landon-Hays 9). Instead of practical application to the teaching of writing, preparation programs focus more on writing about or writing of creative texts. As such, the teaching of writing, or its lack thereof, comes from an overemphasis on literature, and to a lesser extent, the implementation of accountability programs (CCSS, in particular).

Finally, for a large number of English/Language Arts teachers, a lack of direction in writing instruction contributes to minimal emphasis on writing in the classroom. Teachers lack good role models for writing and definitive program direction (Read and Landon-Hays 9). With substantial research of how effective or ineffective writing programs are, much confusion about what is best practice exists (Hibpschman and Walters-Parker 2). As a result, teachers are left to develop writing programs based on past experience and personal preference. Without a clear definition or direct alignment with one method over another, systems of instruction and assessment may be vague and invalid. Nonetheless, having a “focused intentional effort to improve the quality of writing instruction” (Hibpschman and Walters-Parker 4) is more important than having a specific writing program. Yet, the necessity of an aligned program throughout an English department has been frequently noted as being important to improving student writing and teacher efficacy.

To improve student writing and teacher efficacy, professional development is essential; however, its availability is problematic. Often, writing instruction and professional development are limited to days out of the classroom or summer institutes with potentially further limited enrollments (White and Hall 4). Although educators know that professional development in writing instruction is important to the quality of students’ writing and that the writing of high

school students will not improve when their teachers do not engage in professional development in process writing instruction (Graham and Perin 461), what are English/Language Arts teachers to do?

The fact of the matter is that writing is not taught to the extent that other elements of English/Language Arts are. Writing falls behind reading—both literature and nonfiction—as a low priority in the classroom. Despite efforts to push writing through textbooks, assessments, and standards, it holds seemingly less importance in the classroom than it should. And, throughout the discussion, it is feared that even with this research, “Nothing [will] significantly [change] the way we teach” (Tibbetts and Tibbetts 478).

## **Chapter 3: METHODOLOGY**

This chapter includes an explanation of the research design, procedures, population and sample, instrumentation, and data collection.

### **Research Methodology**

As the intent of this study was to ascertain what writing has been done in Minnesota's English classrooms, the methodology centered on data gathered from public school teachers. The study uses quantitative and qualitative (mixed methods) techniques to collect perception data from the participants. The research questions guiding this study were as follows:

1. According to Minnesota's English/Language Arts teachers, what types of writing are high school students doing in their classrooms?
2. According to Minnesota's English/Language Arts teachers, how frequently are students writing for formal and informal purposes?
3. According to Minnesota's English/Language Arts teachers, what challenges or barriers do they face in providing writing instruction and assessment?

### **Procedures**

To gather the intended data, a researcher-designed, mixed methods survey was distributed via email to a sampling of English teachers at public high schools in Minnesota (See Appendix C). The survey included demographic data along with questions about the types of writing students completed in their English courses as well as the frequency of writing that was completed. Additional questions asked teachers to respond to barriers or challenges found in teaching, providing feedback, or correcting writing.

## **Population and Sample**

The population of this study was limited to Minnesota public school English teachers. More specifically, the teachers selected were instructing general education courses designed for sophomore students. This group was selected as most schools that involve Advanced Placement or International Baccalaureate programs in the state begin those tracks in students' junior year of high school. General education teachers were also selected to disaggregate them from special education, honors, or pre-AP/IB programs in order to create a more standard sample.

The current number of high school teachers specifically providing instruction to 10<sup>th</sup> grade students is unavailable on the Minnesota Department of Education website; however, there are 452 public high schools serving students in 10<sup>th</sup> grade. This number includes public, charter, and tribal schools. Therefore, from this, it can be determined that there are at least 452 potential participants. From this population, a yield of 80 in the sample is necessary to have a 95% confidence level with a  $\pm 10$  percent margin of error. To raise that margin of error to  $\pm 5$  percent margin, a sample of 208 participants must respond.

## **Data Collection: Procedures and Analysis**

Data collection procedures were done as noted below and according to the expectations established by the Internal Review Board (IRB) at St. Cloud State University. To ensure anonymity and confidentiality, no names or specific identifying information were collected. Participants were assured of these protective features prior to completing the survey. The data collection was completed exclusively online with responses gathered through Google Forms.

Google Forms is the most effective means for data collection as the format is effective and efficient. Google Forms creates questionnaires using a variety of question types and answer formats that can be transferred electronically into Google Sheets for analysis. The analysis tools

may be used with the Google products, or the data may be easily moved to an Excel file. In distributing the questionnaire, once email addresses are added into the send file on Google Forms, an email is generated in which the questionnaire and all necessary documents are embedded. The files may also be distributed via links or attachments. Even if the file is transferred, materials stay with the original document for use by the appropriate parties. Such is the case with this study.

Despite the lack of a list that identifies the state's English teachers, the Department of Education has a distribution list of each school's principal; therefore, for data collection, that list was utilized. To gather a broad enough sample, an email was sent to each high school's principal with a request to forward the invitation and survey to the appropriate individual who teaches English to sophomores (See Appendix C). Although the inclusion of a third party may have been possible, this method was more efficient and convenient than calling each of Minnesota's high schools or visiting each school's website to determine the appropriate participant.

### **Instrumentation**

The instrument used for data collection was a survey that included four sections: demographic data, types of writing typically assigned, frequency of writing, and challenges or barriers teachers of writing face. Each question was developed from the existing literature covered in Chapter II.

The survey was designed using Google Forms. This format allowed for data to be collected in a spreadsheet format for future analysis. Because Google Forms can be easily linked to an email address, the instrument was easily distributed and completed through the participant's email. In the first email (sent to school principals), the study purpose was briefly

noted along with the request for forwarding and the link to the survey. In the email sent, attachments included the IRB approval and the consent information.

### **Validity and Reliability**

This specific instrument was tested for validity or reliability in itself; however, the questions were drawn from previous studies deemed valid and reliable (Applebee and Langer *Writing Instruction*; Kiuahara, Graham, and Hawkin; Read and Landon-Hays; Tibbetts and Tibbetts). For this instrument specifically, validity was determined through the use of a pilot test that asked respondents to comment on whether each question measures what it was intended to measure.

### **Pilot Study**

To build the validity and reliability of the study, a pilot test was given to a select group of teachers. Because of their proximity and availability, the pilot group was teachers in the Freshwater Education District, an educational collaborative to which this researcher's school district belongs. The pilot survey was implemented in two ways: a collection of data from the survey and feedback on questions and responses. This information was used to revise and refine the instrument for use with the target population.

The pilot study was sent to all English teachers in the Education District identified as teaching a sophomore-level English course, per their district webpages. Freshwater Education district serves 13 school districts with 12 high schools. According to data gleaned from each high school's webpage, emails were sent to 20 individuals. From those emails, three respondents noted that they no longer teach a sophomore English course, and one email came back as undeliverable. Therefore, the final population of the pilot study was 16. From that population, 10 respondents chose to participate.

All of the respondents noted having experience in teaching English for at least six years; however, their experience in teaching sophomore English accounted for less than half of each respective career. All of the respondents noted having education beyond a bachelor's degree with 70 percent achieving at least a master's degree. Respondents provided feedback on content of the survey noting time it took to complete (an average of 11 minutes), some challenges in opening the survey, and a need to use a particular search engine to effectively access the survey. With these responses in mind, settings in the programming part of the survey were modified to make the survey more accessible and allow responses to be modified after initial submission within a one-week time limit.

### **Data Collection**

After reviewing the pilot test, this researcher analyzed results and decided that the only modifications within the survey were in the settings of the survey, issues not relevant to the content of the survey. Therefore, the survey was deemed ready to distribute to the state's administrators.

Data was collected for a period of three weeks in May with two distributions completed. The first email was sent May 5, 2017, to 452 administrator emails. From those emails, five were undeliverable, one administrator responded "Unsubscribe," one noted the school is project-based and has no specific English course, and one shared that the school currently has no high school level programming at this time. Additionally, administrators representing large school districts (Apple Valley-Eagan, Minneapolis, St. Cloud, and South Washington County) indicated that their schools have policies that prevented this research from being done. Specifically, forms were to have been completed and approval was to have been gained prior to distributing the survey. On average, the return time approximated for such approval from school district officials

was approximately two-three weeks. As such, these were not done as time to complete the research was nearing the end of the school year. One school district also required a \$20 administration fee in order to conduct research. As a result of this, a combined 20 high schools, and their sophomore English teachers, were eliminated from the sample. Despite these hurdles, 64 responses were collected.

A second survey request was sent to administrators on May 15, 2017, to bolster reliability. In this distribution, administrators in the previously noted districts were eliminated from the list. As emails were collected from respondents for the purpose of follow up and requests for results, those representative districts and administrators were also removed from the second email. The second distribution added 23 responses, resulting in 87 respondents. The survey was closed on May 23, 2017.

### **Treatment of Data**

After collection, data was used to find trends and correlations. Each question from non-demographic sections was analyzed based on response rates. Descriptive data was shared with frequencies of responses. Correlations between questions were made taking demographic information as the variable for study. To do such analysis, ANOVA was used.



## **Chapter 4: REVIEW OF THE DATA**

The purpose of this research was to answer the following research questions:

1. According to Minnesota's English/Language Arts teachers, what types of writing are high school students doing in their classrooms?
2. According to Minnesota's English/Language Arts teachers, how frequently are students writing for formal and informal purposes?
3. According to Minnesota's English/Language Arts teachers, what challenges or barriers do they face in providing writing instruction and assessment?

Data is presented in order of the research questions with review, analysis, and commentary to follow.

### **Respondents' Demographics**

The data shared in this section reflect responses gathered from 81 English teachers who teach throughout Minnesota. Although 87 respondents participated, six individuals indicated that they were not currently teaching an English course to sophomores; therefore, their responses were not included in discussion later in this section.

The following table shows the demographic data for all 87 respondents. In some cases, individuals did not respond to the specific criteria listed.

Table 1

*Teacher and School Demographics*

Qualifier	Frequency	Percent
<u>Teaching Location (n= 87)</u>		
Urban	7	8.05
Suburban	9	10.34
Rural	71	81.61
<u>Teaching Classification (n = 87)</u>		
Public	83	95.40
Charter	3	3.45
Tribal	1	1.15
<u>Number of Sections Taught Specific to this Survey (n = 87)</u>		
0	6	6.90
1	22	25.29
2	28	32.18
3	19	21.83
4	6	6.90
5 or more	6	6.90
<u>Number of Weeks in a Grading Period (n = 79)</u>		
6 weeks	1	1.26
8 weeks	2	2.53
9 weeks	10	12.66
10 weeks	3	3.80
12 weeks	12	15.19
16 weeks	5	6.33
17 weeks	1	1.26
18 weeks	36	45.58
19 weeks	1	1.26
20 weeks	3	3.80
22 weeks	1	1.26
36 weeks (full year)	4	5.06

Respondents to the survey were primarily teachers in rural, public high schools who taught at least two sections of English to sophomore students. Nearly 70 percent of the respondents noted teaching at least two sections of the course studied; over 35 percent of respondents shared that over half of their teaching day was dedicated to teaching sophomore English.

Of the respondents who noted they currently taught sophomore English courses and who completed the survey, data on years of experience and education were collected. Those findings are found in Table 2.

Table 2

*Teacher Experience and Education*

Qualifier	Frequency	Percent
<u>Years Teaching (n=81)</u>		
1	2	2.47
2-5	14	17.28
6-10	11	13.58
11-15	9	11.11
16-20	15	18.52
21 or more	29	35.80
No Response	1	1.24
<u>Years Teaching English to Sophomores (n=81)</u>		
1	9	11.11
2-5	24	29.63
6-10	16	19.75
11-15	6	7.40
16-20	15	18.52
21 or more	9	11.11
No Response	2	2.47
<u>Highest Degree Earned (n=81)</u>		
Bachelor's	7	8.64
Bachelor's with additional credits	19	23.46
Master's	18	22.22
Master's with additional credits	31	38.27
Specialist's	3	3.7
Doctorate	2	2.47
No Response	1	1.24

Teachers who responded to this study are highly experienced. Over half of respondents have taught more than 15 years, and over one-third had taught over 20 years. However, that experience did not necessarily correlate to the number of years teaching English to sophomores as less than one-third of respondents have taught that course for more than 15 years. This group

of teachers is well educated. The majority hold Master's degrees or higher, which corresponds with years teaching. All of the first-year teachers noted having Bachelor's degrees, while all but six teachers with over 20 years of experience hold at least a Master's degree.

Since no collective data is readily available from the Minnesota Department of Education on English/Language Arts teachers' achieved degree levels, years of experience, or the specific number of English/Language Arts teachers employed, the data shared within this document may not be representative of the state as a whole. Additionally, a lack of urban or suburban respondents limits the study as more reflective of rural teaching situations.

Additional descriptive data was collected from the respondents regarding English/Language Arts teachers' preparation or training to teach writing classes. In regard to courses in their pre-service training, results were mixed. Nearly equal numbers of respondents noted having no training in the teaching of writing in college (17 responses), having one (16 respondents) or two (17 respondents) courses, and having three or more courses (18 respondents). Twelve respondents did not remember the number of preparatory courses they had taken.

Similarly, respondents noted engaging in a variety of specific professional development activities done related to the teaching of writing. With the exception of 10 individuals, all other teachers had engaged in at least one professional development activity about writing in the past two years. Of the 71 remaining respondents, 48 had done their own reading or research on the subject, 34 had taken a workshop or training offered outside of their schools, 32 had engaged in a professional learning community (PLC) on the topic, and 30 had been involved in workshop or training in their schools. A limited number of teachers had taken a college course on teaching

writing (17 respondents), and only 21 respondents reported attending a professional organization's meeting focused on writing instruction.

Attitudes and perceptions about teaching writing were also requested as part of the demographic portion of the survey. Teacher responses described what individuals liked and disliked about teaching writing. Respondents were excited to teach writing as a means to generate thinking, explore creativity, develop student voice, and learn more about their students. Some noted an interest in teaching the structures of composition in its various modes, while others described positive experiences in working through the writing process. More often than not, teachers shared that their enjoyment came from seeing student growth and improvement in writing and thinking, especially when "the lights come on." What teachers dislike most about teaching writing falls into a few areas: time to provide feedback, evaluate, or grade writing; providing grammar instruction; and dealing with a lack of student motivation and independent thinking. Writing instruction, particularly in providing feedback and evaluating student work, is, as one respondent noted, "labor intensive." Several respondents lamented the lack of time available in the school day to work with students individually; additional respondents shared how difficult providing timely feedback during and after the writing process is with the constraints of the school day. One respondent shared, "I spent about 9 hours grading this weekend and only got through half of the essays." A dislike for teaching grammar and mechanics was another frequent dislike. This was especially challenging for teachers who commented that they work with ELLs and students who speak dialects other than Standard American English. Lastly, respondents claimed that low student motivation and a lack of willingness to think made writing instruction an unfavorable experience for them. Low motivation or willingness to work beyond one draft, to proofread and edit, to address challenging

concepts, and to work with feedback given were noted as frustrations teachers had with their students in the writing process. While the reasons to dislike teaching writing were many, respondents shared many more reasons to like teaching writing and were much more verbose in those responses.

### **Types and Frequency of Writing Done in Sophomore English Classrooms**

Respondents replied to four questions regarding the types and frequency of writing done in their classrooms. In these questions, respondents provided data that addressed the first two research questions. As such, both types and frequency information were provided. The first survey question dealing specifically with writing instruction—“Responding to the English course(s) taught specifically to a general sophomore audience, how often do your students write for the following purposes?”—aligns with the Common Core State Standards (CCSS) expectations for types of writing students are supposed to engage with in their English classes. According to the Standards, students are to write “arguments focused on *discipline-specific content*” and “informative/explanatory texts, including the narration of historical events, scientific procedures/ experiments, or technical processes” (Common Core State Standards Initiative). Additionally, narrative writing is to be embedded in the writing students do as it adds to description and analysis. The CCSS document does not indicate an amount of writing or specific forms writing should take; however, a recent interpretation of the CCSS indicates that writing should not only be done “routinely over extended time frames (time for reflection and revision) and shorter time frames (a single sitting or a day or two) for a range of discipline-specific tasks, purposes, and audiences” (Common Core State Standards Initiative), but that students should write argumentatively 40 percent of the time,

informatively 40 percent of the time, and narratively 20 percent of the time (Coleman and Pimentel 12).

Gathering data on frequencies and types of writing that would reflect the group as a whole proved difficult because teachers reported that their courses were taught over different lengths of time. Since some courses were taught in terms as short as six weeks and others as long as the full year, results were disaggregated to reflect those differences. Certainly time constraints and expectations of the CCSS would play a role in the ability to address each mode and form of writing on which data was gathered.

According to the Common Core State Standards, students should be writing in three primary modes throughout their high school years: expository, informative, and narrative. In this study, those modes were reported as being taught; however, results proved to be out of alignment with CCSS's recommended balance that expects expository and informative writing to be the bulk of a student's writing experience. Collectively, respondents shared that their students wrote in a narrative mode less frequently than the other two modes as prescribed by CCSS; yet, there is not a significant distinction between the emphasis on one mode of writing over another as noted in the responses.

Table 3 details the frequency of responses for the modes of writing done for all respondents and those who teach courses that last 18 weeks. The numbers of respondents who gave each response are noted.



Table 3

*Frequencies of Modes of Writing in Sophomore English Classes*

Qualifier	Never	Once a term	A few times each term	Once or twice a month	At least once a week	No response
<u>All Teachers</u> (n=81)						
Argument	4	21	33	14	6	3
Informative	2	19	34	12	11	3
Narrative	9	29	29	6	5	3
<u>Teachers with 18-week courses</u> (n=36)						
Argument	3	7	15	7	4	0
Informative	2	6	17	6	6	0
Narrative	6	12	13	3	2	0

Teachers' responses to the modes of writing done in class showed that most students do write in each of the modes required by CCSS and that students are writing in their sophomore English courses. Statistically, the median frequency of each mode of writing was "a few times each term," regardless of the length of the term. To break down the largest demographic of the group (teachers with 18-week courses), they aligned statistically with the whole; however, it would be expected that their frequencies would be higher than those teachers who reported teaching in shorter terms. Of those teachers who reported that their students "never" write arguments, three taught in an 18-week term. Of those who reported having students write arguments "at least once a week," four taught in an 18-week term; the remaining two respondents taught in 8- and 9-week terms. The same held true for writing

done in the informative mode; the statistical median and mode was “a few times each term.” However, both of these teachers reported teaching in an 18-week term.

The writing of narrative mode provided the most statistically telling data. While the median and mode responses for the frequency of writing narrative was “a few times each term,” when used as a tool to analyze alignment with CCSS expectations, teachers who reported a high frequency of narrative writing were most out of alignment with the standards. The Common Core seeks to have students writing twice as many arguments and informational works as narratives. In this study, teachers who reported that their students “never,” “once a term,” or “a few times each term” wrote in narrative mode were statistically aligned with recommended frequencies. However, those who reported that their students wrote narratives “once or twice a month” ( $p = .023$ ) or “at least once a week” ( $p = .022$ ) were statistically different from the group and out of alignment with the recommendations. Teachers whose students wrote narratives “once or twice a month” reported having students write arguments and informative pieces with the same frequency or less often than narratives. Those teachers who reported that their students wrote narratives “at least once a week” also reported that their students wrote in expository modes less frequently than recommended. Although two of these teachers reported their students wrote in informative modes at least once a week, no one reported writing argumentatively more than “a few times each term.” As such, the ratio recommended by the CCSS was out of alignment for those whose writing focus for sophomore English was in the narrative mode.

English teachers in this survey reported that their students have written in various forms throughout their sophomore English courses. Despite differences in lengths of terms,

it was evident that students have been engaging in writing tasks; however, more traditional and classroom-based forms of writing prevailed in the responses given. When asked how often students wrote in the forms listed, the most frequently noted were worksheets and exercises, journal entries, essay exams, and class notes. The least frequently noted responses were multi-step instructions and those forms of writing that involved electronic media such as blogs, social media posts, and online discussion boards.

Table 4 shows the forms of writing teachers noted their students engaged in during their terms. Noted below are the responses from the entire group and from those who have 18-week courses.

Table 4

*Frequencies of Forms of Writing in Sophomore English Classes*

Qualifier	Never	Once a term	A few times each term	Once or twice a month	At least once a week	No response
<u>All teachers</u>						
<u>(n= 81)</u>						
Letters	41	32	6	0	0	2
Speeches	12	44	18	5	0	2
Stories	15	41	14	5	3	3
Poems	28	29	18	3	0	3
Journal entries	14	5	17	15	28	2
Book reviews	23	32	19	5	0	2
Multi-step instructions	50	16	7	3	2	3
Blogs	68	7	2	1	1	2
Social media posts	65	9	4	1	0	2
Online discussion boards	53	10	10	4	2	2
Class notes	5	9	26	20	19	2
Worksheets or exercises	3	7	21	17	31	2
Essay exams	3	10	32	29	4	3
On-demand writing	22	22	25	8	0	4
<u>Teachers with 18-week courses</u>						
<u>(n= 36)</u>						
Letters	15	16	5	0	0	0
Speeches	6	23	5	2	0	0
Stories	7	20	5	4	0	0
Poems	13	9	12	2	0	0
Journal entries	5	0	6	9	16	0
Book reviews	11	8	14	3	0	0
Multi-step instructions	22	6	6	1	1	0
Blogs	30	3	1	1	1	0
Social media posts	29	6	1	0	0	0
Online discussion boards	24	5	4	2	1	0
Class notes	3	2	11	12	8	0
Worksheets or exercises	2	5	10	7	12	0
Essay exams	3	3	14	13	3	0
On-demand writing	9	11	10	5	0	0

In addition to these forms of writing, respondents added that their students also wrote research papers (11 respondents), literary analysis (7), reflection papers (6), persuasive essays or speeches (3), summaries (3), plays (2), arguments (2), and various other short assignments.

These results are consistent with the findings previous researchers. Kiuahara, Graham, and Hawken found that the most common forms of writing in high school English classrooms were homework assignments, reading responses, worksheets, and summaries. In their 2010 study, Addison and McGee found that in-class journals, reflective writings, and summaries topped the forms of writing for high school sophomores. In this study, the most frequently assigned forms of writing were journal entries and worksheets or exercises. Zumbrunn and Krause called for increased use of 21<sup>st</sup> Century technologies and audiences in writing in their 2012 study; however, with the low number of assignments done in digital formats (online discussion boards, blogs, or social media posts), their recommendations have gone unheeded.

According to respondents, the length of student writing assignments varied greatly. When asked how many papers of various lengths students write in a typical term, 75 percent of respondents had their students write six or more paragraph-length assignments each term, while 20 percent never had their students write a paper of longer than two pages in a term. Writing, it appears, was limited to shorter pieces as shown in Table 5.

Table 5

*Frequencies and Lengths of Writing Assignments*

Qualifier	0 times	1 time	2-3 times	4-5 times	6+ times	No response	
<u>Length of writing assignments</u>							
<u>All teachers (n=81)</u>			1	4	12	61	3
A paragraph	0	1	4	12	61	3	
A page	4	7	31	23	14	2	
One to two pages	4	18	38	14	4	3	
Three to five pages	16	38	22	2	0	3	
More than five pages	52	23	1	0	0	5	
<u>Teachers with 18-week courses (n=36)</u>							
			1	4	12	61	3
A paragraph	0	0	4	3	29	0	
A page	4	1	9	13	8	1	
One to two pages	4	6	14	9	2	1	
Three to five pages	5	7	13	0	0	1	
More than five pages	24	11	0	0	0	1	

Teachers reported that the length of student writing assignments has tended to be rather short, with paragraph and one-page length being most popular. Of those teachers who assigned one extended piece (three to five pages), six assigned papers of five or more pages in their terms. Twelve of the 22 teachers who assigned two to three papers of three pages or more also assigned at least one paper of over five pages. On the other hand, of the 52 teachers who never assigned a paper of five or more pages, 13 never assigned a paper of three to five pages, and 28 assigned one paper of that length. These results may be consistent with Applebee and Langer's beliefs on how long student writing at the high school level tends to be. In a reporting of their 2009 study,

Applebee and Langer found that only 19 percent of writing done at the secondary level was over a paragraph or more (“What’s Happening” 21).

Examining those teachers with 18-week courses, a clearer picture of the writing requirements emerged. In those courses, teachers reported assigning several more paragraph-length assignments than longer papers. Most writing assignments were of paragraph or page length. Those teachers who reported assigning papers of extended lengths (three or more pages) were also assigning several papers of the other lengths as well. The 11 teachers who assigned papers of five or more pages in length also assigned at least one paper of three to five pages, at least 1 paper of one to two pages, and at least four to five paragraphs. On the other hand, of those 24 who did not assign a paper of more than five pages, four did not assign a paper over two pages.

What these results showed is that writing frequency varies widely. Students are either writing frequently in various modes for varied purposes, or they are limited in their scope of writing in mode, type, and frequency. There is a decided lack of consistency across the sample population.

### **Challenges and Barriers in Providing Writing Instruction and Assessment**

Telling information was shared about what places barriers or challenges in front of teachers when providing writing instruction. In addition to asking respondents to reply to what the challenges were and their impact on instruction using a Likert scale, English/Language Arts teachers were asked to share, in a brief written response, what challenges, barriers, and obstacles they face in the teaching of writing as well as what impacts students’ ability to write effectively. Frequencies of responses to the Likert scale are noted in Table 6 for all respondents.

Table 6

*Obstacles that Present Challenges in Teaching Writing*

Qualifier	Not a challenge at all	Some challenge	A minor challenge	A major challenge	No response
<u>Obstacles that Present Challenges in Teaching Writing (n=81)</u>					
Lack of district or school-adopted curriculum	38	26	10	5	2
Lack of comfort, knowledge, or training	41	30	7	0	3
Lack of writing models	37	31	11	0	2
General resistance from students	2	39	31	7	2
Varied abilities and skills of learners	2	28	22	27	2
Time constraints within the curriculum	4	23	28	24	2
Time constraints in providing individualization	3	9	35	32	2
Time constraints in providing feedback	3	15	26	35	2
Time necessary for grading on personal time	3	12	14	50	2
Lack of support from administration or colleagues	41	18	13	7	2
Heavy teaching load	7	23	24	25	2



These responses can be classified into four categories: student-related obstacles, teacher and classroom-related obstacles, and school-level or structural obstacles, and curricular obstacles. Student-related obstacles involved their general resistance and the varied skills and abilities they bring to class. Teacher-related obstacles included personal lack of comfort and hours needed to grade on personal time. School-level structural or curricular obstacles included those areas controlled at a school or district level, including a lack of district-adopted curriculum, time constraints in providing individualization (which is also a CCSS-related issue), time constraints in providing timely feedback, lack of support from administration and colleagues, and a heavy teaching load. Curricular obstacles included a lack of models to use in the classroom and time constraints in the curriculum. Coupled with the narratives provided by respondents, the results of Table 6 took shape in practice as further detail added insights into the responses given.

#### Student-related challenges

English/Language Arts teachers who responded to this survey shared concerns about the difficulty in addressing the varied skills and abilities of learners effectively in their classes. Of the 81 respondents, 49 noted that learner differences create a minor or major challenge that affects the way they teach. Of the 27 who noted that the varied skills of students create a major challenge, over half of those teachers were experienced teachers with 11 or more years in the classroom.

Student skill levels and language ability was frequently noted as a barrier to teaching writing in respondents' classrooms. Seven respondents simply noted that the varied abilities of students in their classrooms make writing instruction a challenge; some instructors defined those varied abilities. An increasing number of English Language Learners (ELLs) in the general sophomore English classroom presented challenges to a few teachers. One teacher shared that

“about 20% of [the] students are ELL and the skills that they need to work on are much different from those of [the] other students that much time is spent catching them up with where they need to be as compared to their peers.” Similar comments echoed this including the difficulty ELLs face in “translating between English and Spanish, especially with sentence structure issues” and the “wide range of levels among ELLs” in the general education classroom. Concerns with skill level were not limited to ELLs, however, as several teachers commented on a trend downward in regard to cognitive ability and cognitive aptitude. A veteran teacher shared that “the gap in ability is widening, and the top doesn’t seem to be as high as it was say 10 years ago.” This difference was attributed by one respondent to the fact that “students spend less time reading outside of school and don’t seem to have the same skill in writing as in years past, which makes teaching writing extremely difficult.” Laments were frequent regarding lower performances in student writing, thinking, and reading skills. One teacher commented that her “best writers are [her] best readers, and those who are not reading have limited literacy across the board.” Another added that “many don’t read often or well, so they don’t consistently see good models. Without them, their writing suffers.” Yet another teacher commented, “students that are avid readers tend to have above average vocabulary and sentence writing skills...Reading and writing go hand-in-hand, and because students aren’t reading as much, vocabulary and writing skills are limited.”

A lack of skill is not exclusively attributed to ELLs and non-readers. Skill deficits were also attributed to students not spending time on their own writing, missing instruction on basics, and frequent communication “by emoticon and sentence fragment.”

It is not just learner skill levels that posed a challenge in the classroom; respondents also shared that student resistance impacted writing instruction. Almost half of respondents reported

that “general resistance from students” was a minor or major challenge that impacted the ways in which they teach. Of those who noted that resistance was a major challenge, five of the seven had been teaching for 16 or more years.

Student resistance to writing stemmed from five primary areas: self-confidence, motivation and lack of purpose, dislike of process, and time. None of the teachers commented that students were overtly resistant to writing; rather students held beliefs in their own inability to be successful as writers. Several respondents noted that students lack confidence in their own writing abilities especially in idea development or getting started with writing assignments. One teacher shared that students do not “buy in” to the topic or purpose for writing; once that happens, this teacher said, “their effort stops.” Motivation to write was linked to student perceptions of their ability and the value of their voices. One particular issue was that students feel “they have nothing of value to say.” As such, these teachers have seen students respond to writing indicating “they believe they are terrible writers,” saying “writing isn’t their thing,” or that “what they say doesn’t matter.” A lack of motivation also extended into a dislike for writing as activity and apathy toward the topic.

Student dislike of process was reported frequently as a resistance factor. According to a few teachers in this survey, when students do not feel successful or feel the work is taking too much time, they resist writing. One teacher remarked that more and more students are giving up on writing because they just want to be done with the writing assignments given. This teacher elaborated: “Students just want to complete the assignment; they don’t care if they’re improving. Once the work is done, the idea leaves their mind and doesn’t ever see improvement or expansion.” Another teacher shared that students “typically do the bare minimum required and rarely go back to proofread or make improvements.” Unwillingness to put in the work,

especially following through with proofreading and editing in the writing process, was a common resistance factor noted by respondents. According to one respondent, “Students lack desire to evaluate and make changes. Once it is on paper, they want to be done.” Another teacher wrote, “They are begrudgingly cooperative when it comes to completing a paper, but it is difficult to convince [students] that once they have something written, they can make it better. [Students] just want to be done.” As one teacher simply put, “students just won’t proofread. To them, when it’s done, it’s done.”

The final resistance factor that received notice in teacher responses was the idea of time. For students, the issue of time was related to that which was necessary to complete work outside of class. This relates directly back to dislike for process. For one respondent, the busy schedules of students correlated to resistance. This individual wrote, “Students today are busier than ever. Students are not willing or able to devote time to writing activities; their goals are primarily to finish the task, even if it is not their best product.” The lack of willingness to devote time to writing was an issue for another respondent who said that the problem is “living in a society that is based on immediacy—[students] don’t want to take the time necessary to craft good writing.”

Beyond these factors, English/Language Arts teachers in this survey identified other areas of student life or situation that created challenges in the teaching of writing. Among these were student absences, mental health issues, family structures where parents were not able to read or write in English, significant time spent on social media, and living in poverty. Poverty was linked to several of the above-mentioned factors as it negatively affected the links between reading and writing, student access to a literature-rich environment, and contributed to a feeling of lack of voice or purpose.

Teachers understand that students bring a variety of issues to the classroom that will impact their abilities, attitudes, and motivations. While these issues exist, a few respondents who commented that student-related factors create challenges in their classrooms also added a positive note they are willing to work through whatever comes their way.

### Teacher-related challenges

Most respondents in this survey reported feeling comfortable with their own background in teaching writing. None reported feeling that a “lack of comfort, knowledge or training” was a major challenge, and seven reported that it was a minor challenge. Correlating this with the amount of training they received, it is reasonable that four of these respondents had received no pre-service instruction of their own in the teaching of writing, and three reported having only one course. Also, these respondents had done little on their own to engage in professional development activities outside of their own districts or on their own time. All of those who reported that their own discomfort was not a challenge had engaged in at least one professional development activity on their own, with personal reading being the most frequently noted response. This was not an area of particular concern as none of the respondents gave any additional detail to indicate further obstacles related to their own background as writing teachers.

For respondents in this survey, the greatest challenge to the teaching of writing was decidedly time. On the Likert scale listing all obstacles that present challenges to teaching writing, the item that teachers felt presented the most major challenge to teaching writing was the amount of time necessary for grading on personal time. Fifty respondents marked that this is a major challenge that impacts their teaching; an additional fourteen said it presented a minor challenge. These two groups crossed the gamut of respondents; however, for those three respondents who said that necessity for grading on personal time was not a challenge at all, each

of those individuals reported spending at least 31 percent of their instructional time conferencing with students.

Issues of time ran deeply in the narrative responses with a keen sense of frustration evident. Most of these responses were directly related to school-level or structural obstacles; the umbrella of time was referenced over 100 times in the survey responses. Two respondents shared that personal days were used to catch up on grading papers and providing feedback to students. Another teacher commented that family time “often takes a back seat to student essays, even to the point of early morning grading sessions.” Yet another respondent replied that administrators in that school expected that English/Language Arts teachers would use personal time to work with student essays, and that “[English/Language Arts teachers] knew what they were getting into having this as a major.” The anchor of grading and providing feedback (Tibbetts and Tibbetts 480) may inhibit teachers from teaching writing with the intensity and quality they wish to provide.

#### School-level or structural challenges

On a school or structural level, time prevailed again as a significant obstacle to the teaching of writing for this survey’s respondents. Constraints created by schedules and teaching loads were noted as major challenges to writing instruction. A lack of time available for individualization created a minor challenge for 35 respondents and a major challenge for 32 respondents. With over 82 percent of respondents noting this as an area of challenge, it is the most significant of school-level obstacles. This challenge is compounded by constraints on time to give timely feedback to students on their writing and having a heavy teaching load. Teaching load was defined within the survey by the number of students in a class, and of those who noted that a heavy teaching load created a major challenge, just over half had classes of over 26

students on average, and five shared that their classes were typically 31 students or more. For all of these respondents, a typical teaching load was five classes, with at least two of those classes being sophomore English.

Overwhelmingly, English/Language Arts teachers expressed concern about the lack of time for individualization, conferencing, and providing timely feedback in the writing process. Each of these is directly linked to school-related or structural factors such as class size and scheduling. One respondent captured the essence of this issue: “There is a lack of time for individual conferences and formative assessment when class sizes are too large.” For this individual, current class size was noted at 21-25 students. Considering class size, a few respondents commented that having fewer than 20 students would make a difference to accomplishing writing tasks and providing quality instruction. “With classes over 20, I cannot get to each student each period in a meaningful way,” noted one teacher. Another shared, “Class sizes over 15 make giving individual attention to students and their writing much more difficult.” The quarter system was given as a reason for frustration with time; one teacher noted, “With quarters, we only have them for short time periods and run into too many deadlines to cover a lot of curriculum. There is no time for giving solid feedback.” This respondent added that “[one-to-one] time does more to improve writing, and it’s a pity we don’t have enough time for that.” Simply put, one respondent shared, “If I had more time and fewer students, I know I could teach all my students to write well.”

A lack of support or in having district- or school-adopted curriculum was not a significant barrier or challenge for most respondents. Most teachers in this survey did not believe these were areas for concern. Yet, for those who shared that a lack of district or school-adopted curriculum was a minor (10 respondents) or major (5 respondents) challenge, there was little pre-

service writing instruction received and little professional development done within the past two years. This is not to say that curricular concerns did not arise in the survey; they simply did not relate to a district- or school-adopted curriculum. At the district or school level, administrators appear to be supportive of English/Language Arts teachers. Of those 20 teachers who reported a lack of administrative support, marking that to be a minor or major challenge, 13 had been teaching for over 21 years.

### Curricular challenges

Within the survey, two areas highlighted curricular challenges: writing models and curricular time. A minority of respondents found a lack of models to be a challenge to their teaching. As with those who lacked comfort, these teachers also had little pre-service writing instruction and engaged in minimal, if any, professional development. While only 11 respondents found that a lack of writing models was a challenge, additional respondents commented that finding workable writing models that hold students' attention is challenging.

Having good writing models is deemed an important factor in quality writing instruction, and respondents expressed concern with finding acceptable models for their students. One teacher commented there is a "lack of applicable models to [students'] everyday lives. A disconnect from what we do in class to what they do outside of class." This may be attributed to a lack of student reading in the modes in which they are to write; one respondent shared, "If I want my kids to write essays, I need to put essays in front of them. But where are there good, relevant, timely essays that will hook kids and inspire them to write?" Another teacher offered, "There are a lot of models out there that are contradictory or out of date. It would be nice to use materials that are consistent with standards and practices across the state and country." That



concern was echoed by another respondent who was frustrated by the amount of time needed to find models, especially models that will meet the expectations of the CCSS.

Perhaps the greater concern on a curricular level is the demand placed on English/Language Arts teachers to fit all areas of the CCSS into their curriculum. Nearly two-thirds of respondents remarked that time constraints within the curriculum create a challenge on their ability to teach writing. This issue garnered frequent response in corresponding narratives as teacher shared frustrations with a lack of balance in the curriculum and a lack of mastery or teaching of writing at lower levels. The lack of balance in curriculum can be attributed to a heavy focus on teaching reading from elementary through high school. As the one area in English/Language Arts that is consistently assessed at the state level in Minnesota, survey respondents commented that in their districts, more attention is given to reading instruction than any other area in the discipline. A respondent elaborated on this: “Like most k-12 schools, the language arts focus in the elementary is reading due to the increased pressures of standardized testing. If writing is not formally or informally taught in the elementary [school years], middle school and high school teachers have to spend more time teaching and catching up with what should have been mastered in the early grades.” This thinking was repeated in another response: “So much time has been dedicated to tested subjects throughout elementary school that writing instruction has decreased dramatically.” The emphasis on reading led another respondent to share, “We spend a majority of our time working on reading instruction to boost test scores. We have no one holding us accountable for how we are teaching writing and whether or not we are having a positive impact on our students’ ability to write well.” Nineteen additional respondents commented on how students’ lack of writing and lack of writing skill mastery in the elementary schools had a negative impact on the ability to teach them at the high school level, particularly

due to a lack of conventions and grammar basics, spelling instruction, and writing fluency. What writing students did in elementary school, according to respondents, seemed to focus heavily on narrative rather than academic or expository modes, even though the CCSS call for some balance. A few respondents provided specific rationale for this lack of mastery. One noted, “Elementary teachers in our district do not feel comfortable in their own writing instruction.” Another added that writing is not expected or taught across the curriculum, and as a result, “teaching writing is seen as a high school English thing exclusively.” A larger curricular issue emerged in the responses such that high school teachers did not know what the teachers were teaching or what the students were expected to master in the younger grades. Whether this was a “lack of curriculum mapping,” “inconsistent expectations between teachers and across grade levels,” or due to “unfamiliarity with the standards at any given level,” teachers saw a need to have an articulated curriculum that would be followed from elementary through high school.

#### Other challenges

One area that was not included in the survey information emerged from teacher responses as a challenge to teaching—technology. While the availability of technology as a means to write was not generally a challenge, the impact of technology (devices, social media, modes of communication, ease of copying information) was often deemed problematic. With many schools moving to one-to-one devices, iPads being a preferred device in some schools, the lack of a computer or laptop with a keyboard was noted as a challenge by three teachers. Social media—whether tweets, texts, or blogs was noted as changing how students write. One teacher commented, “Today’s technology...seems to teach kids to be brief and impedes them from developing their thoughts.” Another respondent added, “Social media has taken away their need to develop ideas and explain more thoroughly.” A few teachers were troubled by student

reliance on autocorrect and other applications that correct student grammar and conventions intuitively. Further issues created by technology were made in reference to plagiarism. Three teachers shared that students are challenged to understand how using information widely available on the Internet without proper citation is not acceptable. One teacher shared that plagiarism sites have helped increase responsible use of material in student writing, but another added that those sites are expensive, and when schools don't have access to a means to track plagiarism, students don't care about consequences for misuse of information or the impact it has on their own writing.

### **Reflection**

English/Language Arts teachers in Minnesota have been given the enormous task of teaching students to read, write, speak, listen, and use media in ways that make them college and career ready. The Common Core State Standards, adopted by the state legislature, outline over 40 competencies students must master prior to high school graduation, most of which are dedicated to high school students. As a result, high school English teachers are reasonably overwhelmed with the responsibility to manage, prioritize, and deliver material for their students. No wonder the challenges shared in this chapter are so heavy, so complex, and so frustrating, especially since time and resources in schools are primarily dedicated to the teaching of reading. Writing instruction is difficult and requires direction and dedication. Despite the challenges, Minnesota's English/Language Arts teachers believe they are doing their best to produce students who can communicate effectively through written means.

## Chapter 5: REVIEW AND SUGGESTIONS

This study aimed to answer three questions:

1. According to Minnesota's English/Language Arts teachers, what types of writing are high school students doing in their classrooms?
2. According to Minnesota's English/Language Arts teachers, how frequently are students writing for formal and informal purposes?
3. According to Minnesota's English/Language Arts teachers, what challenges or barriers do they face in providing writing instruction and assessment?

In this study, responses to questions one and two showed that there is great variety in both the types of writing and the amount of writing students do in sophomore level English classrooms. Some consistency in the types of writing done aligned with previous research; however, there was little consistency in the frequency of writing in Minnesota's sophomore English/Language Arts classrooms. Results from this study showed that Minnesota's English/Language Arts teachers lack consistency across settings as to what modes and types of writing students do and in the frequency and lengths of assigned works.

What offered a larger picture of the state of writing in Minnesota's sophomore English classes was the commentary provided regarding challenges, barriers, and obstacles English/Language Arts teachers face. For English teachers in Minnesota's high schools, the teaching of writing should be a priority. Unfortunately, the state's emphasis on reading and an overwhelming number of standards make finding balance in classroom curricula difficult. Challenges teachers face in providing writing instruction are largely created by issues out of their control, whether those issues come from students, schools and districts, or state and government agencies. However, these challenges can be ameliorated with assistance from a

variety of places. Heralded by the findings of this study, improvements can be made in and by the following groups: schools and school district administration, teacher training programs and professional organizations, and state and governmental agencies regulating curriculum and instruction.

### **School and School District Administration**

Administrators in Minnesota's school districts create the schedules and cultures in which English teachers deliver writing instruction to students. Whether these schedules include teaching loads, length of class periods or length of courses, administrators make decisions that dictate the structures in which teachers teach. Perhaps inadvertently, many of these structures prevent quality writing instruction from happening. Suggestions to improve the instructional setting for English teachers are as follows:

1. Establish caps on the number of students in classes that include large amounts of writing. With larger classes (24 or more students), a teacher's ability to provide timely feedback and to meet student needs is impeded by time constraints. As feedback and individualization have been found to improve student confidence and success in writing, creating smaller class sizes would make those successes increasingly possible.
2. Allow English/Language Arts teachers variety in scheduling to balance courses with large amounts of writing with those that require less writing instruction. Teachers whose teaching load is primarily writing classes have found it difficult to work through the paper load and deliver timely feedback to students. With individual teacher input on scheduling, English/Language Arts teachers should be able to choose to teach a course load that balances their schedule between writing and reading classes.

3. Provide extra time in the teachers' day to allow for frequent and timely feedback on student writing so that English/Language Arts teachers do not need to use personal time. Because the feedback teachers give students within the writing process increases competency, English/Language Arts teachers should be allowed extra preparatory periods to respond to and assess student writing, to address student needs in writing instruction, and to differentiate instruction.
4. Assist teachers in combating student apathy and lack of motivation. Beyond what teachers and schools provide in scheduling, school administrators should help teachers to uncover and address reasons for student apathy and lack of motivation in writing and developing voice. Steps should be taken for students to understand the importance of their voices in writing, of their ideas being expressed, and the necessity to be able to write for a variety of purposes.
5. Develop district and school-wide writing programs to include elementary school expectations for grammar instruction, composition standards, specific modes of writing, and writing across the curriculum. Secondary English/Language Arts teachers are spending what seems like excessive amounts of time instructing students on grammatical structures and writing process basics rather than working with the standards assigned to their levels. School administrators must take the lead in directing a scaffolded approach to writing instruction beginning in the primary grades.

### **Teacher Training Programs and Professional Organizations**

1. Prepare English/Language Arts teachers for the teaching of writing by including writing process training, methods for providing effective feedback during the writing process, means for handling the paper load, and incorporating technology and social media.

Before they enter the classroom, English/Language Arts teachers should be trained in writing process pedagogy appropriate to the various levels of secondary students. Such instruction should include specific, tried techniques that have been proven effective within secondary situations.

2. Require all prospective elementary teachers to enroll in a course that teaches writing process and fundamentals of grammar. As elementary teachers must be the initial point of contact in writing instruction, it is imperative that they feel comfortable teaching writing and understand grammatical concepts.
3. Require prospective secondary teachers to enroll in a course on teaching writing across the curriculum. Since writing assignments are given in many academic departments, pre-service teachers should be required to engage in coursework that helps with writing instruction specific to that discipline.
4. Develop and provide a collection of writing models appropriate to a variety of modes, genres, and writing abilities. Good models of writing are widely available, but finding what is appropriate for a range of situations is difficult and time consuming. If a collection of models were available, greater consistency in writing instruction may occur as teachers would have similar works from which to build student capacity in writing. One challenge in providing quality writing instruction is the time it takes to find models that will apply to the concepts and skills teachers aim to bring to students.
5. Provide ongoing training in writing instruction via sources available for teachers whose schools and homes are a distance from metropolitan areas or college settings, i.e. online courses or workshops, webcasts or podcasts, online discussion boards, etc. Minnesota's English/Language Arts teachers want professional development opportunities; however,

many offerings are not accessible for teachers in rural areas, in places where substitute teachers are not available, or where time constraints or other responsibilities prevent involvement. Using technology to deliver professional development would allow for training to reach a wider audience in workable time frames. Additionally, such training may increase teacher familiarity with technology and increase student use of technology in writing classes.

6. Create a resource bank for lessons on writing that have been proven to effectively meet CCSS and build on areas of student interest or serve to counter student resistance factors. Writing process instruction has been de rigueur for decades. With the introduction of CCSS, how to meet the standards within the writing process framework is unclear and requires a significant amount of work. A bank of effectively implemented lessons may freshen instruction and ease some burden in meeting the needs of the range of student abilities.

### **State and Governmental Agencies Regulating Curriculum and Instruction**

1. Clarify expectations in the Common Core State Standards to specify types of writing accomplished by each mode and amounts of writing students should complete in each grade range for each mode of writing listed. Currently, one must dig deeply in the CCSS documents to interpret what is specifically expected of students. State agencies should develop a list of expectations for types of writing that would address each mode, numbers of papers to be written to meet the standards in each mode, and lengths of papers expected for each grade level. Without such expectations, wide disparity will continue to exist in Minnesota's schools.



2. Provide model essays in each mode of writing listed in the CCSS to serve as exemplars at each grade level. Like having models to inspire and guide writing, model essays would provide teachers and students with a benchmark for mastery and success. The standards identify specific moves a student should include in each mode of writing; yet, the statements are broad and without example. Model essays would establish a direction for writing instruction that would meet the given standards.
3. Reinstate a statewide writing examination to include writing as an important component of state standards. We value what we test; therefore, a writing examination should be given to high school students to determine if writing instruction is meeting the goals established in the standards as the reading, mathematics, and science examinations are currently doing. When the writing examination was removed from Minnesota's graduation requirements, less emphasis was placed on writing in classrooms from grades kindergarten through grade 12.

### **Future Studies**

This study could be replicated to address a limitation noted previously—responses lacking from an urban or suburban sample. Results from this study were gathered largely from teachers in rural areas, which may not be representative of the larger population of English/Language Arts teachers in Minnesota. Many rural teachers are assigned to teach many courses in addition to the sophomore English/Language Arts class on which this study was based. In larger schools, it is possible that English/Language Arts teachers would be assigned to fewer courses and multiple sections of the same courses. That may alter response rates noted here. It could be speculated that responses from a later study would be different from this study since rural teachers tend to teach a more varied schedule than metropolitan teachers. In this

study, respondents reported teaching an average of 1.98 sections of sophomore English/Language Arts and an average of 2.85 other courses in English/Language Arts. Future studies could be conducted to determine if these findings are generalizable to Minnesota's urban and suburban populations.

### **Final Comments**

My hope for this project was to gain insight on why English teachers are not teaching writing in their classrooms. Although I am confirmed in the belief that some of this is due to time, load, and not knowing how to balance all of the elements of English/Language Arts that are outlined in standards, I was surprised to discover an overwhelmingly long list of reasons teachers struggle with writing instruction and getting students to write. The more I studied the responses provided, the more upset I became with the lack of support given to English/Language Arts teachers by school administrators, professional organizations and training programs, and governmental agencies. This is not to say that these groups do not care about writing instruction and English/Language Arts teachers. I firmly believe there is a lack of awareness of the comprehensiveness of writing instruction and of the difficulty in doing this work well. Perhaps some of the aforementioned suggestions will provide some inspiration.

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## Appendix A: IRB Approval



### Institutional Review Board (IRB)

720 4th Avenue South AS 210, St. Cloud, MN 56301-4498

**Name:** Jennifer Lynn Meagher

**Address**

USA

**Email:** jlmeagher@stcloudstate.edu

**IRB PROTOCOL  
DETERMINATION:  
Exempt Review**

**Project Title:** Teacher perceptions on the State of writing in High School Classrooms

**Advisor** Dr. Judith Kilborn

The Institutional Review Board has reviewed your protocol to conduct research involving human subjects. Your project has been: **APPROVED**

Please note the following important information concerning IRB projects:

- The principal investigator assumes the responsibilities for the protection of participants in this project. Any adverse events must be reported to the IRB as soon as possible (ex. research related injuries, harmful outcomes, significant withdrawal of subject population, etc.).

- For expedited or full board review, the principal investigator must submit a Continuing Review/Final Report form in advance of the expiration date indicated on this letter to report conclusion of the research or request an extension.

- Exempt review only requires the submission of a Continuing Review/Final Report form in advance of the expiration date indicated in this letter if an extension of time is needed.

- Approved consent forms display the official IRB stamp which documents approval and expiration dates. If a renewal is requested and approved, new consent forms will be officially stamped and reflect the new approval and expiration dates.

- The principal investigator must seek approval for any changes to the study (ex. research design, consent process, survey/interview instruments, funding source, etc.). The IRB reserves the right to review the research at any time.

If we can be of further assistance, feel free to contact the IRB at 320-308-3290 or email [ri@stcloudstate.edu](mailto:ri@stcloudstate.edu) and please reference the SCSU IRB number when corresponding.

**IRB Institutional Official:**

Dr. Latha Ramakrishnan  
Interim Associate Provost for Research  
Dean of Graduate Studies

#### OFFICE USE ONLY

SCSU IRB# 1697 - 2120	Type: Exempt Review	Today's Date: 3/14/2017
1st Year Approval Date: 3/3/2017	2nd Year Approval Date:	3rd Year Approval Date:
1st Year Expiration Date:	2nd Year Expiration Date:	3rd Year Expiration Date:

## **Appendix B: Notice of Consent**

### **A Study of Writing Instruction in Minnesota's High Schools Implied Informed Consent**

You are invited to participate in a research project about the teaching of writing in Minnesota's high schools. You were selected as a possible participant based on your school's characteristics and your role in the district as an English teacher.

#### **Background Information and Purpose**

The purpose of this study is to examine how writing is taught, what writing is being done, and what factors contribute to instruction, feedback, and frequency of writing in our state's sophomore English courses. This project is part of a master's thesis prepared for the English Department at St. Cloud State University.

#### **Procedures**

If you choose to participate, you will be asked to answer the online survey questions based on your attitudes and experiences in teaching English courses directed to sophomores (general 10<sup>th</sup> grade classes). As this research is focusing on the general education curriculum provided to students who are sophomores, responses should not include pre-Advanced Placement, International Baccalaureate, special education, or online courses. The survey will take approximately 10 to 15 minutes.

#### **Risks and Benefits**

There are no foreseeable risks associated with participation in this study. Your input is valuable to the further study of writing instruction, teacher preparation for the teaching of writing, and common core standards.

#### **Confidentiality**

To protect confidentiality, your responses will be recorded anonymously, and individual identification will not be available or published in this study. It is important to know that your responses will not be disclosed to persons in your school district, the Minnesota Department of Education, or any professional organizations.

#### **Research Results**

If you would like to receive a copy of the results, please email [jlmeagher@stcloudstate.edu](mailto:jlmeagher@stcloudstate.edu) with your name and the request.

#### **Contact Information**

If you have any questions about this study, please contact the researcher, Jennifer Meagher, at [REDACTED] or the advisor, Dr. Judith Kilborn at [REDACTED]

#### Voluntary Participation/Withdrawal

Participation in this study is voluntary. If there are questions you are not comfortable answering, you do not need to answer them. All of your information is confidential and designed to develop a picture of writing instruction in Minnesota. You are also welcome to withdraw from the study at any time without penalty.

#### Acceptance to Participate

Your completion of the survey indicates that you are at least 18 years of age and that you consent to participation in the study.

## Appendix C: Instrument

### English teacher perceptions on the state of writing with high school sophomores

This survey is designed to gather data on the state of writing in Minnesota's classrooms where English is taught to sophomore students. For all intents and purposes, the teaching of writing includes all aspects of the process including instruction, feedback, and assessment. Your email is collected in order to determine response rates and will be destroyed at the time of data analysis.

1. Email address \*

\_\_\_\_\_

2. How would you characterize the school in which you teach? Check all that apply.

*Check all that apply.*

- Urban
- Suburban
- Rural
- Public
- Charter
- Other: \_\_\_\_\_

3. How many courses do you teach each day?

*Mark only one oval per row.*

	0	1	2	3	4	5 or more
Sections specific to this survey (general English for sophomores)	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Other English/Language courses	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Other courses in another department	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>

4. What is the average class size for the classes on which you are basing the responses for this survey?

*Mark only one oval.*

- 1-10
- 11-15
- 16-20
- 21-25
- 26-30
- 31-35
- 36+

5. How many weeks are in a full grading period for this course? (e.g., a semester or trimester). Please note if this includes final exam periods.
- 

6. Including this year, how many years have you taught English/Language Arts?

*Mark only one oval.*

- This is my first year
- 2-5
- 6-10
- 11-15
- 16-20
- 21+

7. Including this year, how many years have you taught the course on which you are basing responses for this survey?

*Mark only one oval.*

- This is my first year
- 2-5
- 6-10
- 11-15
- 16-20
- 21+

8. In your pre-service teaching/college coursework, how many courses did you take that prepared you specifically for the teaching of writing?

*Check all that apply.*

- I do not remember
- None
- One
- Two
- Three or more

**9. What is the highest academic degree you hold?**

*Mark only one oval.*

- Bachelor's degree
- Bachelor's degree with additional credits
- Master's degree
- Master's degree with additional credits
- Specialist's degree
- Doctorate (e.g., Ed.D., Ph.D.)
- Professional degree (e.g., M.D., LL.B., J.D., D.D.S.)
- Other: \_\_\_\_\_

**10. Since graduation from a bachelor's program, have you received training or certification in any of the following programs? Check all that apply.**

*Check all that apply.*

- Advanced Placement English
- International Baccalaureate
- National Board for Professional Teaching Standards
- National Writing Project
- Other: \_\_\_\_\_

**11. Over the past TWO years, which of the following professional development activities have you participated in specifically related to the TEACHING OF WRITING?**

*Check all that apply.*

- A college course taken after your first degree was awarded
- A workshop or training offered in your district
- A workshop or training offered outside of your district
- A professional organization meeting
- An observation of another writing teacher
- Mentoring, coaching, or peer observation based on writing instruction
- A professional learning community or study group
- Personal reading or research on the subject
- Other: \_\_\_\_\_

**12. What do you enjoy about teaching writing? You may include what you feel confident about in regard to writing instruction.**

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13. What do you dislike about teaching writing? You may include what you are uncomfortable with in regard to writing instruction.

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14. Responding to the English course(s) taught specifically to a general sophomore audience (not honors, special education, pre-AP), how often do your students write for the following purposes? Please select one response per line.

Mark only one oval per row.

	Never	Once a term (semester, trimester)	A few times each term	Once or twice a month	At least once a week
Argument (to support a claim)	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Informative/Explanatory (to examine and convey complex ideas)	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Narrative (to develop real or imaginary experiences)	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>

15. Responding to the English course(s) taught specifically to a general sophomore audience, how often do your students write for the following purposes? Please select one response per line.

Mark only one oval per row.

	Never	Once a term (semester, trimester)	A few times each term	Once or twice a month	At least once a week
Letters	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Speeches	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Stories	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Poems	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Journal entries	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Book reviews	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Multi-step instructions	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Blogs	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Social media posts	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Online discussion boards	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Class notes	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Worksheets or exercises	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Essay exams	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
On-demand writing (practice exams)	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>

16. What other types of writing do students complete that were not listed above?

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17. During a full term, how many papers of the following lengths will you assign to the sophomore English students?

Mark only one oval per row.

	0	1	2-3	4-5	6+
A paragraph	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
A page	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
One to two pages	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Three to five pages	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
More than five pages	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>

18. Overall, what percentage of your instructional time teaching writing to general sophomore English students is spent in each of the following? Please select one response per line.

Mark only one oval per row.

	0%	1-10%	11-20%	21-30%	31-40%	41-50%	51-75%	76% or more
Assignment explanation	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Idea development	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Organization of ideas	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Fluency (effective expression, variety in structure and word choice)	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Mechanics and conventions (punctuation, spelling, grammar)	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Peer review	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Teacher-student conferencing	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Study of models	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Writing/Word processing	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>

19. What resources (electronic sources, websites, text series, self-created materials, etc.) do you use in the teaching of writing? Please be as specific as possible.

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20. To what extent do each of the following obstacles present a challenge in your teaching of writing? Please select one response per line.

Mark only one oval per row.

	Not a challenge at all	Some challenge, but I can work through it	A minor challenge that impacts teaching	A major challenge that impacts teaching
Lack of district or school-adopted curriculum	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Your own lack of comfort, knowledge, or training	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Lack of writing models to use in the classroom	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
General resistance from students	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Varied abilities and skills of learners	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Time constraints within the curriculum	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Time constraints in providing individualization in the classroom	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Time constraints in providing timely feedback	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Time necessary for grading on personal time	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Lack of support from administration or colleagues	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Heavy teaching load	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Other? Please note below.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>

21. What other challenges, barriers, or obstacles do you face in the teaching of writing?

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**22. What challenges, barriers, or obstacles do you believe impact students' ability to write or write effectively?**

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