

Writing in the Social Studies Classroom

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### **Introduction**

Writing should play an important role in the social studies classroom. Many teachers are concerned with the necessity to cover massive amounts of content and do not see how they could take the time to teach students discipline specific writing. Also, some teachers may shy away from teaching writing because they lack the training to do it effectively. Actually, writing in the content areas can perform double duty by providing students opportunities for writing while simultaneously strengthening their understanding of the content. Writing provides three major benefits for students. The first is that writing stimulates higher-order thinking as students must assemble, evaluate, select or discard, organize, and relate facts and concepts in the process of writing. Second, out of this manipulation of data comes new insights and knowledge. Third, students must grapple with bias and point of view (Shellard & Protheroe, 2004). Both research and practice show that carefully designed writing tasks can generate learning.

### **Disciplinary Writing**

What is actually happening in many social studies classrooms is that writing is a very small or even non-existent part of the curriculum. In a study conducted by Zigmond (2006), teachers were only using writing about 25.6% of the time. The majority of this was student note-taking at about 10% of overall instruction. The rest of the writing included handouts, quizzes and tests, computer usage, and brief writing samples. The brief writing samples composed merely 0.7% of instructional time and included a list of questions for the visiting mayor, answers to questions posed by the teacher, and a letter to the editor of an 1840 newspaper. None of these instances required students to write more than a paragraph. There were no instances of writing assignments given to students as homework. This creates a vicious cycle because if students are

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not expected to write, they give up on those skills and do not continue to develop them (Zigmond, 2006). One other major reason that writing in all disciplines is important is the high demand on students who go to college to write well. Students who have transferred from two-year colleges cite the level and amount of writing required at four-year universities as one of the most critical means to success (Galin, Haviland, & Johnson, 2003).

The point of teaching students to write in the disciplines is not to produce a good writing product that will receive a good grade, but to produce good writers with voices, ideas, and intentions. Students should pursue rather than perform and create writing that is interesting to themselves and their readers. This requires them to think about the process. Students must also understand the basics of writing in the discipline and practice with interpreting historical texts before engaging in historical writing (Galin, Haviland, & Johnson, 2003). Students should also be aware of the range of historical writing genres including recording, explaining, and arguing. This can be compatible with teaching content and can be productively integrated into the history classroom through readings of primary documents or historians' later writings. This can help students to produce more clearly structured texts (Coffin, 2006).

A student's writing may exhibit features of argumentation while still revealing fundamental flaws in historical thinking. It is in the quality of evidence and explanation, not the quantity, that disciplinary writing comes into play. The quality is largely determined by the level of a student's disciplinary approach to their writing as well as their use and explanation of evidence. Approaching writing from a disciplinary stance encourages students to transform the knowledge in their essays. They can gain a better understanding of documents, learn how to appropriately interpret documents and select excerpts for use as evidence, recognize author credibility in selecting evidence, and present evidence in a historical context that clarifies its

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significance (Monte-Sano, 2010). Educators should see writing as fundamental to all subjects and integrate it across the curriculum. In social studies, there should be an emphasis to teach historical writing as well as for students to learn and retain content. This can be done through analyzing news articles, conducting family interviews, writing formal biographies, and writing in-class informal journals (Nagin, 2003).

### **A Case Study**

Research from a case study of two social studies teachers who claimed writing as a goal of their teaching, found several interesting results relating to the necessity of teaching disciplinary writing and how to do so. Both teachers gave their students opportunities to write at least once a week. The difference between the two teachers was that Ms. B went through the process of writing in class and taught the students how to write in the social studies. Mr. R did little to no explicit writing instruction and gave students writing assignments orally every two weeks. He emphasized knowing facts and recall in order to write good essays. Ms. B taught students how to support ideas with evidence, how to structure an argument, and how to make their own interpretations. She modeled proper outlining techniques and gave her students regular feedback to help students develop as writers. The researchers developed their own versions of document based questions which were less difficult than the AP tests' DBQs for use as pre and post tests. In analyzing the writing samples, the researcher looked for two major aspects; argumentation and historical reasoning. Within these he looked at the use of evidence to support claims, connections, explanations of perspective or bias, and if evidence was used in the appropriate context. The majority of Ms. B's students improved in the areas of argumentation and historical reasoning, while Mr. R's students stayed the same and some scores even declined (Monte-Sano, 2008). This study ended with the author's suggestions of five qualities of good

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writing instruction. Teachers should do the following in their classrooms: approach history as evidence-based interpretation, read historical texts and consider them as interpretations, support reading comprehension and historical thinking, put students in the role of developing interpretations and supporting them with evidence, use direct instruction, guided practice, independent practice, and provide feedback (Monte-Sano, 2008).

### **Provide Clear Goals and Audience**

Students of history should be working towards the goal of becoming better historical writers. Although similarities exist among all types of writing, historical writing requires a different kind of knowledge and thinking than writing in other courses. Research shows that expert and novice writers differ in task representation, procedural knowledge, and writing processes. Novices seem to lack an understanding of the task or purpose for their writing, and they have unclear goals to guide them as they write (Monte-Sano, 2010). This is an area in which teachers can help students in any discipline by creating well-focused writing assignments with clear goals.

Relating to clear goals, audience is an important aspect of creating a writing assignment, no matter if it is formal or informal. Students should know that they can have an audience other than the teacher. They must learn to relate themselves to the material so that their writing is interesting to themselves and to their readers. Depending on the assignment, this audience could be an expert beyond the teacher or the student could be the expert talking to someone who is not as familiar with the subject (White, 1998). It can also be very beneficial for students to have a real world audience that may have effects on the world around them. This can engage students and help them develop their writing skills because they will want a paper to be perfect if the

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audience is a real person beyond the teacher. For example, students could write letters to help save a historical landmark in their town. They can also learn about the town's history at the same time (Rochford & Hock, 2010). Teachers can help students to learn about audience through activities such as analyzing advertisements in class. These can be historical or contemporary depending on the curriculum. Ads are good for this type of modeling activity because students will be able to recognize the audience, but the teacher may have to help them look below the surface for certain more subtle messages. This lesson has many aspects. Students will learn interpretation of documents, audience, bias, and persuasion. Also, teachers can begin to instill the skills students will need in the real world since advertisements are everywhere they turn (White, 1998). Writing skills and social studies skills can be combined into one activity, so no time is lost when it comes to covering content.

### **Procedure**

Studies have shown that college students have been less likely than historians to recognize that writing involves constructing an argument and situating a topic in historical context by connecting related issues. In another study, few college students were able to construct an original written argument by analyzing information. Most of them simply recited facts and reproduced others' arguments. Since novice historians lack the strategic knowledge to enable them to think historically and weigh evidence, they find it difficult to write an evidence-based interpretation. Procedural knowledge is critical for students to know if they are to be successful in constructing an argument (Monte-Sano, 2010). Again this is something that history teachers can help their students to learn.

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Shellard and Protheroe (2004) have identified several skills that frequent writing can help develop. These include determining the relevance of information, distinguishing between fact and opinion, making reasoned judgments, identifying unstated assumptions, detecting bias, identifying propaganda techniques, judging authenticity of the author, predicting possible consequences, and testing conclusions or hypotheses. Many of these skills are those which social studies teachers wish to teach their students. Students should engage in writing to learn activities such as planning their writing, creating multiple drafts, discussing their work with the teacher, and engaging in writing that requires long answers. These students score higher on the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) tests (Nagin, 2003). Given these advantages, teachers certainly need to help students work through the process of writing in class.

Teachers should allow students to take risks in their writing in class. School is for making students better at these skills, and that growth can only occur if they are encouraged to push themselves even if they are not one hundred percent correct all the time. This can also help students to think about the problems of writing and to understand that writing is a process (Galín, Haviland, & Johnson, 2003). The beginning of the writing process is often choosing a topic. Students can have a good deal of trouble with this, and they may end up wasting valuable time on this preliminary step in the writing process. Writing assignments that are too open-ended can lead to stalling and stress. There are steps a teacher can take to help students to choose and narrow their topic. First, teachers can design an effective writing assignment with explicit instructions. After the assignment is given, teachers can instruct students to reread their notes to search for unanswered questions or confusions. They could pursue one of these questions in a writing assignment. Another approach is simply to sit down with the student and talk to them

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about possible topics. Conversation with another person can spark an idea or help the student to narrow a wide topic (Shellard & Protheroe, 2004).

The process approach to writing involves walking students through a series of steps during a long-term writing assignment. Pre-writing is the step where students make decisions like topic, focus, audience, approach, and conduct research (Shellard & Protheroe, 2004). Students can be given graphic organizers to help them organize the information that they have obtained through research and interpretation (Zigmond, 2006). There is a general consensus that engaging with the assignment before the start of writing improves the quality of the work (White, 1998). Drafting is when students begin to write. They should know that drafts do not have to be perfect or polished, but they should provide a solid foundation to work from. Students should take drafts seriously, but they should not be stressing over every detail. Many educators and writers suggest several drafts. Expert writers tend to work in a non-linear fashion requiring several drafts (Monte-Sano, 2010). This is a good time for in-class peer review. Editing and revision is when students clarify their meaning and fit. This is a good time for another student-teacher conference to discuss the writing process as well as the final product. The final stage is publishing, which may or may not happen in the classroom with student work, depending on the goal of the assignment (Shellard & Protheroe, 2004).

Each of these steps requires scaffolding and practice. Teachers should model writing in class and provide practice in class in discipline specific ways. Shellard and Protheroe (2004) identify four types of writing in the social studies that could be incorporated into the classroom. Reporting is when students are directed to compile information with a minimum of critical or original thinking. Exposition is when students are asked to explain an idea, conduct an investigation, synthesize issues, or bring a fresh point of view to a problem. Narration is when



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students are asked to tell a story. Argumentation is when students are asked to evaluate, defend, or attack an idea or belief. Each of these types will develop different skill sets, but if pressed to focus on one, teachers should aim to choose the options that provide opportunities for more higher order thinking. Those are typically exposition and argumentation. No matter which type of writing is chosen for an assignment, teachers can help students by modeling the process for them, which can be broken down into five steps. Analyze the question or test item for key words and topics. Generate what is already known about the topic. Use this prior knowledge to actively search for examples in the text. Move text annotations into a concept map to organize the material in an effective and useful way. Lay out the sequence for writing (Shellard & Protheroe, 2004).

Informal writing tasks can improve learning and retention as well as engage students in thinking critically about the content. This is important because students will be asked to use the skills developed in school as adults in the real world (Nagin, 2003). Another activity that could be useful for students is to assign online group discussion as homework. The groups would be required to address a question. Each student would need to support their argument or points with evidence. They would have a sustained conversation on the topic and build off of one another. Each student would have to contribute. The teacher can look into the conversation occasionally to make sure that students are on task and focused (Galín, Haviland, & Johnson, 2003). This will help to build students' discussion skills and writing skills, particularly in the area of supporting their points with evidence.

### **Revision**

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Novice writers tend to engage in a straight line process of writing by first establishing a thesis and then finding facts to support that thesis with little planning or revision involved in the process. In contrast, expert historical writers move back and forth between knowledge and writing, leading to a deeper understanding and the transformation of knowledge. In one study, Advanced Placement U.S. History students had difficulty moving from simply reporting information to making interpretations based on multiple documents. Supporting a historical essay's argument with evidence appears to be difficult for students, not only because they do not think about history in terms of interpretation and evidence but because of the complexity of the writing process itself (Monte-Sano, 2010). This adds a difficult second layer to the job of teaching discipline writing in history classes. However, this only adds to the argument that students should be given more opportunities to write across all disciplines so that they can improve and learn.

Revision is a necessary part of the process. Many students believe that only one draft is necessary for school writing assignments even as they begin college. Revision must be modeled and taught in the classroom as well as incorporated into assignments. In order to teach students responsibility and ownership of their work, they should know that they are expected to revise their paper beyond just the teacher's suggestions so that the paper is balanced. This also communicates to students that their ideas are valid (White, 1998). In addition, students should understand that not all writing will be for a final product. In-class writing can be done for many other purposes as well. Informal writing assignments help students to build skills prior to applying them to long-term formal assignments. These assignments can take several forms including entrance and exit tickets as well as learning logs, in which students address confusions

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and questions or provide summaries of the lesson or what they found most interesting about a lesson. (Shellard & Protheroe, 2004).

### **Designing Writing Assignments**

White (1998) provides a list of questions that a teacher should ask themselves about a writing assignment to see if it will be effective and of high quality. The list is long, so it will not be reproduced here in full, but some of the questions are: What do I want the students to do and is it worth doing? How do I want students to do the assignment? Who is the audience? How does the assignment relate to what comes before and after it in the course? How will I evaluate the work? These questions will help guide teachers to focus on what they want the process and the product to look like (White, 1998). Other guidelines have more research to back them, such as the NAEPs list of characteristics of good writing assignments. Successful writing assignments take into consideration content and scope so that students are required to interact with the material and transform their knowledge from different sources. Organization and development allows students to have an appropriate amount of scaffolding to successfully complete long-term writing assignments. This includes giving students specific and clear directions in the writing prompt. Good writing assignments ask students to write to an authentic audience to encourage genuine communication. This may include asking the student to become an expert on a topic so they can be certain that their audience does not necessarily know more than them. The final characteristic is engagement and choice. Students write best when assignments are engaging, and this occurs most often when they are given choice (Nagin, 2003; Shellard & Protheroe, 2004; Gardner, 2008).

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Good writing assignments result in good writing. Prompts require detail and clarity in order to provide support and direction for students. The teacher should use clear language that is appropriate for the level of the students (Gardner, 2008). Also, it is important to distribute the assignment in written form so that students can refer to it at the different stages of the writing process. The assignment should be discussed with the class when it is distributed, and examples of good papers may also be given to help students (White, 1998). As teachers develop writing assignments, they should pay attention to the entire writing process. This means that teachers must create explanatory materials, define a task that touches on the four NAEP characteristics, explain expectations to students, and point out available support to students. Defining the task involves identifying an authentic audience, positioning students as experts, requiring students to interact with various texts and knowledge, and giving students choices in their work. Exploring expectations can be done by modeling responses and demonstrating how to read and compose texts. Rubrics should also be shared with the students. Providing support and explanatory materials to students involves scaffolding the writing process, providing multiple opportunities to write, and providing opportunities for peer review and student-teacher conferencing (Gardner, 2008).

### **Assessment**

Assessment is an important step in the process of writing assignments. It is important to keep in mind that assessment is different than testing. Assessment is designed to measure specific skills and knowledge in order to help students improve. Teachers must reduce the threat of writing and improve their instruction in writing. A crucial aspect of developing essay tests or writing assignments is to find an effective topic and to design the assignment with specific skills in mind to assess. If assignments are poorly designed, the writing will be bad and it may not

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measure writing ability. Clear, idiom-free prompts are best. Personal narrations happen with unclear questions, so prompts should be specific (White, 1998). The teacher must communicate clear expectations to the students in the form of rubrics, so that students and teacher know what to look for in the completed assignment (White, 1998; Shellard & Protheroe, 2004). Monte-Sano (2010) revisited the research study conducted with Ms. B and Mr. R to pull out five benchmarks to be used for assessing student writing in social studies: factual and interpretive accuracy, persuasiveness of evidence, sourcing of evidence, corroboration of evidence, and contextualization of evidence.

The purpose of responding to student writing is to improve student writing. Teachers should allow students to understand and respect the reasons for comments and judgments on papers. For this reason, comments should be clear, detailed, and specific so that students understand that you have read their paper and are trying to help them improve. Comments on drafts should focus on conception and organization rather than mechanical errors. They should be clear and concrete, not overwhelming in amount, and also positive and encouraging (White, 1998; Galin, Haviland, & Johnson, 2003). The objective is to help students, not to break their spirit.

### **Conclusion**

Teaching writing in the social studies is necessary and complex. It takes an ample amount of preparation, thought, and reflection. If social studies teachers are responsible for helping students to become knowledgeable and active participants in the world after school, they must teach writing to students. Students should be encouraged to look at writing as “a way of thinking, a means of discovery, an act of saying something – really saying something – and

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adding to the community's storehouse of knowledge" (Galin, Haviland, & Johnson, 2003, p. 16).

From this perspective, they are experts in their own right, and their opinions matter for more than just grades inside the classroom. This sets them up to be knowledgeable and capable adults in the world outside of school as well.

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