OPEN RESPONSE WRITING

18 Strategies to Improve Student Performance

Grades 3-10
By Joan Pokrant

Collins Education Associates LLC
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Foreword by John Collins

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Foreword

Collins Education Associates is proud to publish Open Response Writing: 18 Strategies to Improve Student Performance. Joan Pokrant created this book in response to many of our clients’ requests for strategies to help students write better open response answers on state tests. And this is a real need. With the pressures that have come with national mandates, schools need to demonstrate, to a sometimes harshly critical public, that they are doing an effective job. But to view this book as a test prep book would be taking a much too limited view of its purpose. If state and national tests were to go away tomorrow, this book would be an important resource. Tests, especially well-constructed open response tests, do so much more than test; well-constructed open response tests teach.

In a June 2010 article in Educational Researcher, Rohrer and Pashler make a strong, research-based argument for the “testing effect.” The researchers review studies conducted as far back as 1939 and find that “a test that requires a learner to retrieve some piece of information can directly strengthen the memory representation of this information.” Research cited in this exhaustive study finds that testing slows down the rate of forgetting and also gives students important information about what they need to go back and study again. They also found this effect is not as powerful for multiple choice tests where students can select from given answers. The power of the testing effect is that it causes students to retrieve information, and this effort helps students remember. Giving frequent open response questions is not only test prep, it is good teaching.

From this research and other similar studies, we know that open response/constructed response helps improve students’ retention of content, helps teachers learn what students don’t understand (formative assessment), and provides data for valid and reliable summative assessments of that knowledge. Those of you who are familiar with the Collins Writing Program know that my associates and I have been touting the benefits of what the Collins Writing Program* describes as Type Two writing—writing with correct content. Type Two writing is open response or constructed response writing. Thirty years ago, we did not know that we would be such strong advocates for open response writing. Joan’s book provides the details and strategies to help teachers and students create well-constructed open response answers leading to more content knowledge and deeper understanding of that knowledge.

John J. Collins, Ed.D.
CEO, Collins Education Associates LLC

*For those interested in learning more about the Collins Writing Program, see Chapter 9.
CHAPTER 1

Introduction

State assessments have drastically changed the way school systems design their writing curriculum. Writing assignments used to consist of writing occasional research papers, lab reports, and some narrative writing about independently chosen topics. With the passage of the No Child Left Behind Act in 2001 and the resultant state assessments, students were suddenly expected to write more often and in every subject. When teachers were first asked to assign writing in math, many were at a loss, because they knew that writing about math was not writing about the number five jumping off the page and having an adventure. Rather, students now had to show and explain how they got their answers.

Today, a well-developed, comprehensive writing program looks very different than it did just a decade ago. It consists of writing for all purposes (to compare and contrast, to persuade, to inform, to explain, etc.) in all subjects (math, science, history, music, physical education, art, foreign languages, etc.). Writing does not take place just in the English class anymore, and it is not the sole responsibility of the English teacher to prepare students for the writing required on high-stakes tests. Now, a comprehensive writing program includes assigning short and long prompt writing, assessing writing using specific assessment tools such as state scoring guides, teaching students how to analyze and revise their own writing, and analyzing tests and their questions. Scores are made public and schools are judged on their performance in the media. In many states, the data generated by these high-stakes tests plays an integral role in determining state funding, graduation eligibility, teacher evaluation, staff development, school accreditation, improving instruction, and even, in some areas, the prices of real estate. For those reasons, school districts regularly ask me to provide strategies to help all teachers, regardless of the subjects they teach, to improve their students’ scores with an emphasis on improving students’ open response answers. While responding to these requests, it quickly became clear that in most school districts teachers were not spending enough time analyzing their students’ writing, the writing lessons they assigned, and the actual tests.

One goal of this book is to improve students’ scores on open or constructed response questions; however, you will find brief references to other kinds of test questions as well, since to completely understand open response questions, students must have an
understanding of all kinds of test questions. Chapter 2 presents the important concept that students should not be surprised by the test. It is the premise around which this book was written and is a must-read! In Chapter 3, you will find a self-assessment survey to help you analyze your writing instruction and assignments. Take the survey and then choose a few strategies that you feel would have the greatest impact in helping your students improve their open response answers, and implement them in your class. As you will see, some of the strategies are designed to help teachers and others to help students. The organization of the rest of the book mirrors the survey in that there is a chapter for each category of the survey, and the strategies appear within the designated chapters. This book does not have to be read chronologically. Each chapter stands on its own. Within the chapters, you will find writing assignments, activities, and many examples of student writings and test questions. Since the book is written for teachers of all subjects in grades three through ten, you will find a variety of strategies and techniques for different grade levels or abilities. Choose those that you feel will have an impact on your students. A reference of the Activities and Writing Assignments may be found on the next page.

Although this book is one of several books distributed by Collins Education Associates, readers do not have to be familiar with the Collins Writing Program to implement the strategies. Chapter 9 serves as a quick reference highlighting the important elements of the Collins Writing Program for teachers who already use the program or for those interested in learning more about it. An occasional footnote will refer to the Collins Writing Program and Chapter 9. For those of you who use the Collins Writing Program, you will find text boxes and footnotes that will connect the lesson with Collins.

State tests are similar in many ways, but they each have their own unique format, scoring tools, and frameworks. Become familiar with your state’s frameworks and test, and then modify the strategies found in this book so that they support your own testing situation. You will find that the strategies and tips in this book will serve you well no matter where you teach. An added bonus to teaching students how to use the strategies in this book to help them write effective answers to open response questions is that responding to open response questions is a life skill. As adults, students will be asked to respond to open response questions on job applications, accident reports, business plans, etc. Learning how to read and understand a question and write an effective response could make a difference in the direction that life will take your students as adults. Isn’t that every teacher’s objective?
Chapter 1 • Introduction

Writing Assignments

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CHAPTER 2
No Surprises! Preparing Your Students for State Tests

In *Writing on Demand: Best Practices and Strategies for Success*, Gere, Christenbury, and Sassi (2005) told the story of a student who had just completed a state test and said with confidence, “Nothing surprised me—it was pretty much what I expected. I felt ready for it” (p. 159).

“No surprises.” That phrase greatly influenced my approach to this book. By analyzing state test questions, I discovered that daily classroom writing assignments are quite often different from what is typically asked of students on state tests. The first time students are asked to respond to state test questions, plan writing, write a compare and contrast paper, read and understand a “command question,” or read a certain genre of literature should not be on the day of the test. By the time the state test is administered, responding to all kinds of questions should be automatic. While I do not advocate “teaching to a test,” you do want to be certain that writing assignments in the content areas are meaningful and are aligned with the Common Core State Standards as well as your curriculum. Only by analyzing your state curriculum frameworks and state tests can you really have a clear understanding of what challenges your students will be facing. Implementing the eighteen strategies in this book will reduce the number of surprises when your students take high-stakes tests.

To help reduce the number of surprises, simulate a state test early in the school year as a practice test. After administering the test, give the writing assignment on page 6. Since some students will be reluctant to orally discuss in class what they found difficult or surprising, it is better to have them write their answers. In this way, you will get a response from everyone and not just a few vocal students. You could even let students answer anonymously to ensure perhaps more honesty. Then, based on their comments, make strategic decisions about ways to improve your writing instruction during the school year. Repeat this assignment again after students take the actual state test. (Note: Be sure that you do this when it is legal to do so.) Remember, you are not asking students to provide or discuss actual test questions, just what surprised them about the test. Ultimately, you want every student to respond, “There were no surprises! It was just what I expected.”
**Writing Assignment**

**Any Surprises?**

**Purpose**
To learn from students what was surprising about the test.

**Teacher Preparation**

√ Choose questions from the list below that are appropriate for the grade level and subject you teach. You will notice that some questions address the test itself and some the testing situation such as the length of the test or the set-up of the classroom. Add questions you feel would be helpful to you.

- Were there any words that you did not understand? If so, what were they?
- What parts of the test were the most difficult for you?
- What parts were the easiest?
- Were you clear about where to write your responses (answer box or answer sheet)?
- Were you clear about when and where you were able to take notes on a reading passage?
- Were you clear about when and where you were able to plan your response?
- Were the types of questions similar to what you had been assigned in class?
- Was there anything about the questions that was confusing?
- Was there anything about the setup of the room that surprised you?
- Was the test longer than you expected?
- If there is anything else that you think I should know, please write it below.
- Make a prediction on how you think you did on the test and tell why.

√ Prepare a student focus sheet. Include the prompt written below and selected questions from the list above.

*This assignment is a reflection on the practice (or actual) state test you just completed. Think back to the test and answer the questions listed below. Please be honest in your responses and give as many specific details as possible. You will have ten minutes to complete this writing assignment. Although I will not be grading your responses, I will use this information to develop lessons to help you and future students.*

**Procedure**

1. Assign the focus sheet.
2. Have your students discuss their responses in small groups of 3–5 students.
3. Appoint a scribe for each group to record students’ responses.
4. Ask each group to share their concerns with the class to initiate a class discussion.
5. Collect the written responses as well as the group responses. Analyze their reflections to make strategic decisions about ways to improve your instruction.

*For readers familiar with the Collins Writing Program, this is a Type One writing assignment. See Chapter 9 for a fuller description.*
Chapter 2 • No Surprises

Action Steps for Chapter Two

- Simulate a state test early in the year to collect information about what was surprising to students about the test as well as what they found difficult, easy, etc.

- Make strategic decisions about ways to improve your instruction based on the feedback from your students.

- If possible, repeat the process again after the actual state test to collect the same information about the test.

- Again, make strategic decisions about ways to improve your writing instruction based on the feedback from your students.
CHAPTER 3
Assessing Your Present Practice to Improve Your Students’ Open Response Answers

The survey below will give you an opportunity to assess your current practice and instruction for improving your students’ open response answers by identifying what you emphasize most and least in your classroom. After completing the survey, analyze the results. Identify the strategies that validate the way you are currently preparing your students to respond to writing questions and the strategies that challenge you. The chapters that follow will assist you in making strategic decisions about your current practice and instruction and provide you with action steps to implement those decisions.

Strategies to Improve Open Response Answers

Instructions: Rate your use of each of the following strategies. This self-assessment will be most valuable to you if you are candid in your estimates. Try not to overestimate. Rate the items on how often you actually do them, rather than on how much you like them.

1 – Do not do  2 – Rarely do  3 – Occasionally  4 – Frequently
[a few times a year]  [a few times a month]  [a few times a week]

Reflecting on Classroom Practice
1. Actively consider your state’s standards and curriculum frameworks as you plan lessons. ________
2. Plan instruction based on formative and summative data. ________
3. Maintain a record of writing assignments, with reflections on their effectiveness. ________

Understanding Test Questions
4. Teach students the format and expectations of the five kinds of questions most commonly found on state tests. ________
5. Use test question vocabulary when giving written and oral directions. ________
6. Teach and review test question vocabulary.  

7. Teach students how to read the directions and the questions for understanding.  

8. Teach students how to mark and restate the question.  

**BUILDING CONTENT VOCABULARY**  
9. Teach and review content vocabulary.  

10. Require students to use content vocabulary when writing in content areas.  

**ANSWERING AND ASSESSING OPEN RESPONSE QUESTIONS**  
11. Teach students techniques for marking a reading selection.  

12. Teach students how to plan and write a response that includes specific details.  

13. Provide students with opportunities to score exemplars from the state.  

14. Teach students how to assess and revise their writing.  

15. Create a test-like environment in the classroom and provide opportunities to build academic stamina.  

**CREATING OPEN RESPONSE QUESTIONS**  
16. Integrate released questions from the state into teaching units during the school year.  

17. Give writing assignments that mimic state test questions.  

18. Provide students with opportunities to write open response questions.  

**Where to Begin**  
After completing the survey, it may be clear to you where to begin. There may be some strategies that scream at you, “Work on me!” You may feel that some strategies are more important for your students than others. You may also experience some validation that you are already doing some of these strategies and doing them well. Although all the strategies can make an impact on the success of students, it is the consensus of my colleagues at Collins Education Associates that Strategies 6, 7, 9, 12, and 17 will have the biggest impact on student success. If you cannot decide where to begin, try one of these.  

**Strategy 6 — Teach and review test question vocabulary.** Understanding test question vocabulary removes some of the intimidation that students experience when reading open response questions. Students will be much less likely to skip over open response questions when taking a high-stakes test if they are familiar with the typical language of such questions.
Strategy 7 — Teach students how to read the directions and the questions for understanding. Open response questions often intimidate students. Many just skip them and move to multiple-choice questions. If students feel more comfortable with the directions and questions, they will be much less likely to skip over them.

Strategy 9 — Teach and review content vocabulary. This strategy helps students understand the questions and write quality responses. Math tests generally include several content vocabulary terms in each question. Student responses that include content vocabulary usually demonstrate a better understanding of the math concept.

Strategy 12 — Teach students how to plan and write a response that includes specific details. Utilizing the techniques in this strategy will help students write high scoring answers by supporting their answers with important information. Identifying the main points requested in the question and supporting those main points with important information will generally yield a high score.

Strategy 17 — Give writing assignments that mimic state test questions. Teachers may work very hard to help students improve their responses, but if they do not work on writing assignments that support their state curriculum frameworks or that mimic state test questions, they may be working very hard at the things that do not make a difference. This strategy will prevent surprises.

Begin by choosing the strategies that you feel would have the greatest impact on your students’ responses, focus on them, and then add new strategies as indicated by your observations and the progress of your students. Information and action steps on how to implement each strategy may be found in Chapters 2 through 8. If you are required to develop individual goals as part of your yearly evaluation, this is the book for you. Not only do you have 18 strategies to choose from (several years of goals), but actions steps to help you implement them.
Action Steps for Chapter Three

- Complete the survey.
- Choose the strategies you feel will make the biggest impact on your students’ scores.
- Identify the strategies that are strengths and continue to focus on them.
- Identify the strategies you plan to teach, read the appropriate chapter, and implement the suggested techniques.
- Add strategies to your instruction based on your formative assessments.
18 Open Response Strategies

- Actively consider standards and frameworks when planning lessons
- Plan using formative & summative data
- Maintain a record of writing assignments with reflections on effectiveness
- Teach the five kinds of questions commonly found on state tests
- Use test question vocabulary when giving directions
- Teach & review test question vocabulary
- Teach students how to read and understand test questions & directions
- Teach students how to mark and restate the question
- Teach and review content vocabulary
- Require students to use content vocabulary when writing
- Teach students how to mark-up a reading selection
- Teach students how to plan and write a response that includes specific details
- Provide opportunities for students to score exemplars
- Teach students to assess and revise their writing
- Create a test-like classroom environment to build stamina
- Integrate released state questions into teaching units
- Give writing assignments that mimic state test questions
- Have students create open response questions