

Research to Support Collins Writing Program

When educators consider adopting the Collins Writing Program, they often ask “What is the research? Is this program best practice? Or is it just another flavor of the month, destined to be replaced with a shinier, newer program in a couple of years?” We love these questions.

The Collins Writing Program has a 35-year record of improving student writing and academic skills by providing teachers with strategies and practices that work. The User Results and Research on our website shares over 20 years’ of user profiles from districts in both the United States and Australia. The data shows that implementation helps increase student performance in schools and classrooms as well as on state and national assessments.

Why Stress Writing?

Writing improves reading comprehension, supports content retention, and strengthens critical thinking skills. Competence in writing is necessary for success not only in academic settings but also in career or professional settings and in daily life as a citizen, including understanding civics, economics, and government.

Writing Increases Reading Comprehension. In an exhaustive meta-analytical review of hundreds of research studies, Steven Graham and Michael Hebert report in the *Harvard Educational Review* (2011) that:

One potential means for improving students’ reading is writing. This meta-analysis... present[s] evidence... that teaching students how to write improves reading comprehension, reading fluency, and word reading; and that increasing how much students write enhances reading comprehension. These findings provide empirical support for long-standing beliefs about the power of writing.

Writing Supports Content Retention. Research also supports what many teachers have long suspected — students who write about subject area material are more likely to understand, retain, and skillfully use course content. Educational improvement advocate, Douglas Reeves, states in a 2020 article in *Principal Leadership* that “writing... is strongly related to improved student achievement in reading comprehension, math, science, and social studies.” Harvard Graduate School of Education professor Richard J. Light, in his book on student engagement, *Making the Most of College* (2001), delivers a message that continues to become more timely as we prioritize literacy:

The relationship between the amount of writing for a course and students’ level of engagement—whether engagement is measured by time spent on the course, or the intellectual challenge it presents, or students’ level of interest in it—is stronger than the relationship between students’ engagement and any other course characteristic.

Writing Strengthens Critical Thinking Skills. Writing is also a highly effective means of teaching and practicing higher-order thinking skills. In his article, “Writing and Reasoning” (1984), Arthur N. Applebee of Stanford University suggests that writing improves thinking because it requires an individual to make their ideas explicit and to evaluate and choose among tools necessary for effective discourse. Lauren B. Resnick’s (1987) long-cited work on learning to think stresses that writing should provide an opportunity to think through arguments and that, if used in such a way, could serve as a “cultivator and an enabler of higher-order thinking.” Leading

American educational researcher Robert J. Marzano believes that writing is a means to manipulate knowledge and, therefore, improves higher-order thinking. Most of his nine suggested activities for improved student performance involve writing and have an ultimate goal of improving student performance (Marzano and Pickering, 2001).

Why Collins Writing Across the Curriculum?

The program includes Five Types of Writing and a series of strategies to help teachers effectively use writing and provide students with helpful feedback using a common language and a common approach. Unlike other writing programs that supplant current curriculum or pile on more, the Collins Writing Program enables teachers to increase the frequency of writing while managing the workload commonly associated with writing.

- **Type One** quick writes increase student engagement, build fluency, and encourage divergent thinking. Type One is supported by research in brainstorming, creativity, and effective teaching best summed up in Doug Lemov's *Teach Like A Champion* (2015) techniques. Type One also provides a structure for small group work and class discussions. Additionally, these brief, ungraded writing assignments help students make connections to their classwork, which result in improved performance on summative assessments.
- **Type Two** quick writes are distinct from Type One in that they require a correct response. They take advantage of the last 10 years' research on student retention of knowledge presented by Peter Brown, Henry L. Roediger III, and Mark A. McDaniel's *Make It Stick* (2014). McDaniel's retrieval practice "does not use testing as a tool of assessment. Rather it treats tests as occasions for learning" (Murphy Paul, 2015). Type Two writing provides teachers with a user-friendly framework for practicing the retrieval of essential knowledge and information. As a result, student performance on high-stakes assessments improves.
- **Type Three** assignments are based on the principles of effective focus and feedback areas presented in *Best Practices in Writing Instruction: Solving Problems in the Teaching of Literacy* by Steve Graham, Charles A. MacArthur, and Jill Fitzgerald (2007) and *Engaging Ideas* by John Bean (2001). Every Type Three writing assignment includes a set of three clear, specific, and rigorous grading criteria, referred to as Focus Correction Areas (FCAs). Students and teachers report that consistent use of focused correcting boosts student confidence, improves the written product, and focuses student thinking. Type Three assignments also utilize a read-out-loud editing protocol: Students read their paper out loud to themselves and complete their revisions on the paper, focusing on the FCAs. Professional writers and editors have long known that this is the most effective strategy for revision:

"Reading aloud reshapes what is unclear and awkward." —Peter Elbow, *Vernacular Eloquence* (2012)

"I believe the eye and ear are different listeners ... As writers, we need to please both." —Jane Yolen, *Touch Magic* (2008)

"I find that reading my work aloud ... I can't scan or gloss over anything." —Austin Kleo, *Steal Like an Artist* (2012)
- **Type Four** assignments use the power of peers to improve editing skills and understanding of content as described in Eric Mazur's *Peer Instruction* (2013). But distinct from many peer-editing protocols, the Collins strategy expects peers to share work orally and offer suggestions on meeting the FCAs and the overall quality and clarity of the work. This is not just a good classroom strategy; it is recommended in any situation where

writing is an expectation. When entrepreneur and founder of the Virgin Group, Richard Branson, was interviewed in 2012, he explained his process for editing within his group (Davis, 2018):

When we launched a new company, I reviewed the ads and marketing materials and asked those presenting to read everything aloud to test the phrasing and concept. If I could grasp it quickly, then it passed with muster. We would get our message across only if it was understandable at first glance.

The Type Four peer-editing strategy is designed to help students revise writing so that it is “understandable at first glance.” Unlike Type Three, where students turn in their writing with the revisions on the paper for the teacher to see, Type Four requires a second draft with revisions resulting from the peer edit.

- **Type Five** is the well-developed error-free work that we all want our students to create. This will never be possible without the frequent use of Type One, Two, Three, and Four assignments that clearly define outcomes and help teachers deal with the paper load by efficiently providing clear feedback to students. The growth that occurs by using the Collins framework gives students the ability to complete Type Five writing with less teacher assistance.

Four Essential Assignments

Additionally, Collins Educational Associates has developed four essential writing assignments based on the best current research about teaching, learning, and writing.

- **The Ten Percent Summary.** This assignment requires students to read and summarize short, informational text. It improves reading comprehension, expands content area understanding, and supports the use of high-level vocabulary. It also reinforces the need for proper citation and encourages sharp editing skills. The assignment begins with a sophisticated organizer known as a Collins Focus Sheet (S “T” A r t). Both summarization and the frequent use of organizers are included in Marzano’s nine essential school improvement strategies. It is also a real-world skill. In his book, *Summarization in Any Subject*, Rick Wormeli (2005) says, “Employees must be able to read or perceive something, then make sense of it by manipulating the information, regrouping it, and applying it to a new situation.” The Ten Percent Summary teaches students to do exactly that. Students are not merely retelling, they are synthesizing and demonstrating deep levels of understanding.
- **Argument Writing.** Being involved in argument “lies at the center of achieving [the] goals of fostering critical thought, critical dialogue, and a circumspect and vigilant American citizenry... [and] has particular value and potential in a culture increasingly unable to distinguish fact from fiction, truth from lies” (Alsup, 2005). Our argument strategy also has a focus sheet (H E L P S) for generating and organizing ideas before writing the actual argument. This focus sheet helps students to “enter the conversation,” as Gerald Graff, Cathy Birkenstein, and Russel Durst describe the process of argument writing in *They Say/I Say* (2018). The Collins argument framework is particularly successful because it uses the current best practices of argument writing. Students make claims, include counterclaims, evaluate the credibility of sources, choose the best evidence, respond to the ideas of others, and practice writing in a logical manner with sequenced reasoning.
- **Compare/Contrast Writing.** Examining similarities and differences is another one of Marzano’s nine high-yield instructional strategies. After completing an organizing matrix (we offer several on our Free

Resources webpage), students are asked to write a compare/contrast paper. Harvey Silver identifies six benefits of comparison/contrast activities in his book, *Compare and Contrast: Using Comparative Thinking to Strengthen Student Learning* (2010). According to Silver, comparative thinking strengthens memory, develops higher-order thinking, increases comprehension, enhances writing in the content areas, and develops habits of mind. These benefits are the reason we consider this an essential assignment for every student.

- **Vocabulary Cards.** The last of the four essential assignments is one that both students and teachers find effective. The Collins Vocabulary Card template asks students to include the vocabulary word, a student-friendly definition, and an original sentence. Additionally, we ask students to create a symbol or graphic that represents the meaning of the word. The work of Marzano and Pickering in *Building Academic Vocabulary* (2006) supports the use of the Collins vocabulary assignment. They discuss the importance of having students write the word, use it in context, and create a graphic or symbol. All six of their recommended strategies for teaching for vocabulary are aligned with our suggestions for instruction and the use of this essential assignment.

Our program was built on three decades of research and feedback from educators across the world. It is low cost, does not require specialized materials, and can be used with a school's or district's current curriculum in every grade and in every subject. The school profiles located on our website highlight our work—real results with real teachers and real students. However, we always consider ourselves a work in progress. We continually study current research about teaching, learning, and writing in order to serve our clients. The strategies and methods we incorporate consistently align with current best practices and findings of current research. In the final analysis, writing is always a best practice.

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